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Engaging fathers in child and family services

Participation, perceptions and good practice

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–2009

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Improving the lives of Australians

Note to readers

The names of staff and service users who participated in this research have been withheld to preserve the identity and confidentiality of participants and their families. Care has also been taken to preserve the anonymity of the services and programs that were involved in the research.

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The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–2009 is an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The overarching aims of the SFCS are to help families and communities build better futures for children; build family and community capacity; support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and improve communities' ability to help themselves.

There is a strong sense in the literature that fathering practices have undergone significant changes in recent times. 'Involved' fathering, where men participate more directly and equitably in child rearing, rather than from 'arm's-length' or through their financial contributions, has emerged as a social ideal. Research also indicates that involved fathering, and the harmonious and cohesive family environment that often goes along with it, has positive benefits for child wellbeing. These factors have focused attention on the role of child and family services in supporting and promoting father involvement, by understanding the obstacles that fathers face accessing services, as well as good practice in engagement and service provision.

As part of the themed study component of the national evaluation of the SFCS, this report explores fathers' engagement with child and family services.

This study describes father participation in selected SFCS programs and services and identifies successful strategies for engaging with fathers. The research employed a mixed methodology: a survey of SFCS program managers on father engagement and in-depth fieldwork with a sample of selected services and programs. Service managers and facilitators participated in one-on-one interviews, and focus groups were held with father participants.

Key findings

In the context of the emergence of involved fathering as a social value, and in light of research indicating the positive outcomes for children associated with father involvement, family and child-centred services are called upon to include a greater focus on fathers in their activities. The study found:

▪ fathers were involved in a diverse range of services, programs and activities across the SFCS, although their **level** of participation was far lower than that of mothers

▪ there were a number of sociocultural, service and other factors that acted as barriers to fathers' access to services and vice versa

▪ by their very nature, services that were most successful at engaging with fathers were specifically tailored for men and were exclusive to fathers.

While service providers acknowledged ongoing challenges in engagement, they had put in place strategies to improve father participation. These included:

▪ introducing flexible hours of operation

▪ employing male facilitators

▪ developing father-specific services

▪ marketing services to men in male spaces

▪ using male-friendly language and advertisements

▪ creating service venues where men felt comfortable.

Fathers and professionals shared the view that positive father engagement is most likely in situations where the facilitator is male and a father himself, is liked and trusted, and creates dialogue by sharing personal experiences. Conversely, fathers were alienated by experts and a highly structured program format, and preferred informal, peer discussions and 'hands-on' program activities.

The professionals who participated in the research demonstrated a well-developed understanding of the benefits of father involvement, were keen to engage with fathers and were often enthusiastic and passionate about working with men and fathers. Finally, contact with services and programs was a positive and valued experience for those fathers who participated in the research, in terms of knowledge and skill development, relationships with children and partners, connecting with other fathers and the community more broadly, as well as for resolving personal issues.

1   Introduction

This study describes father participation in selected Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–2009 programs and services. The SFCS is an initiative of Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The study is part of the themed study component of the national evaluation of the SFCS, included to explore priority issues in-depth. The choice of fathers was informed by an understanding among policy makers, academics and community service professions, that despite best intentions, engaging fathers with child and family services can be difficult and that research, practice and policy development in this area is required to improve fathers' access to services.

This introduction provides an overview of the fathering literature including the nature, extent and determinants of father involvement, and the impacts of father involvement on child wellbeing. This provides the context for a discussion of how well fathers are included in child and family services, and their engagement in programs specifically designed to enhance parenting competencies and relationships. The study used a mixed methodology, employing a survey to identify the extent of father engagement with services funded under the SFCS, and using survey replies to form a sample for in-depth fieldwork with professionals and fathers. The fieldwork aimed to highlight the perceptions and experiences of services managers and facilitators working with fathers and to provide insight into how fathers who are involved in services understand and explain their engagement. A central aim of the study was to highlight good practice and the strategies that appear to be successful in facilitating engagement with different groups of fathers in diverse service environments.

1.1   Developmental benefits of involved fathering

Benefits for children

Recent research has focused on the parenting contributions men make to children's development and family cohesion (Fletcher, Fairbairn & Pascoe 2004).[1] Fathers are seen to contribute to children's development through their ongoing investment and participation in care giving (Frey 2003; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda 2004). Studies have indicated that men are as capable as women of providing children with sensitive, responsive, nurturing and stimulating parenting, and that this is favourable for child development (Ryan, Martin & Brooks-Gunn 2006). However, inadequate or abusive fathering can impact negatively on children. If resident fathers (or father-figures) display a high level of antisocial behaviour, this can adversely influence child behaviour (Jaffee et al. 2003). Earlier studies (for example, Leinonen, Solantaus & Punamaki 2003; Phares 1996) also show that negative developmental outcomes are associated with poor parenting or mental health issues in the father.

Understanding the effects of father involvement also requires an understanding of the direct and indirect ways fathers can influence child development. Father involvement has been developed as a concept to describe men's engagement and participation with care giving across a whole raft of tasks and activities. Lamb (ed. 2004) developed the classic three-dimensional definition of father involvement—**interaction** or **engagement** (time spent in one-to-one interactions with the child), **accessibility** (time spent engaged in domestic tasks or in close proximity to the child but not interacting one-on-one) and **responsibility** (the extent to which the father takes responsibility for the child's wellbeing, for instance organising child care or doctor's appointments, taking the child to buy clothes, and so on). Fathers not only influence children through the quantity, type and quality of father–child interactions, but also through the emotional and physical support they provide to their partner, as well as through the provision of economic resources and participation in domestic labour and child care (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda 2004; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004).

The relationship between high levels of positive father involvement and positive self-esteem in children (Culp et al. 2000), for example, is thought to operate via the positive effects of the co-parental relationship. A more harmonious family context, as well as secure attachment relationships between children and parents, provides an optimal context for healthy child development (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda 2004). Similarly, Ryan, Martin and Brooks-Gunn (2006) found that the relationship between highly supportive fathers and higher scores

on cognitive tests at 24 and 36 months were related to the quality of fathers' relationships with their children, the family context in which children lived, **as well as** fathers' participation in day-to-day child care (see also Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Raymond 2004; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda 2004).

Notwithstanding the mechanisms for the effects, which still require some unravelling, studies have consistently found that children with highly involved fathers experience positive outcomes in socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive/educational domains (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda 2004). In the realm of behaviour, mothers with highly involved partners report that their 6 year-old children exhibit fewer internalising (for example, depression and anxiety) and externalising (for example, violent behaviour and defiance) behaviour problems than mothers with less involved partners (Culp et al. 2000). Other findings suggest that this effect is ongoing throughout childhood and adolescence (Amato & Rivera 1999; Flouri & Buchanan 2002a).

In terms of educational achievement, research findings indicate that fathers are less likely than mothers to be involved in all aspects of their children's schooling but that fathers' interest and involvement in children's learning can be linked to better educational outcomes as well as better social and emotional outcomes (National Literacy Trust 2007). There is also evidence linking fathers who read to children from an early age to improved literacy and school readiness in their children (Gadsden & Ray 2003). It is unclear whether this effect operates via the father's role modelling or through the amount of exposure to books and reading the child receives. Studies have also found that supportive play interactions between fathers and their young children can enhance cognitive development and reduce cognitive delay among disadvantaged children (Shannon et al. 2002).

Research evidence suggests that fathers continue to have important effects on their children into adolescence and young adulthood. The quality of father–child relationships and father involvement in adolescence has been related to adolescent self-rated mental health (Videon 2005), academic and employment achievement (Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer 1998), an absence of bullying behaviours towards other children in adolescents (Flouri & Buchanan 2003), and the quality of adult children's relationships with their partners (Flouri & Buchanan 2002b). Further, high involvement combined with a close father–child relationship appears to offer adolescents some protection from engaging in delinquent behaviours and experiencing emotional and psychological distress, although the size of these effects are small in comparison to other determinants such as marital conflict, poverty and parental education (Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer 1998).

Benefits for men

Many men put a lot of thought and reflection into the type of father they want to be, how they interact with their children and the role they take in their children's lives. Although individual responses to becoming a parent vary, for many adults, male or female, having a child broadens their sense of responsibility and brings profound changes to their lives, relationships and identities (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Palkovitz 2002).

From a developmental perspective, the sense of responsibility most men (and women) develop in relation to their children is an aspect of healthy adult development (Marsiglio, Day & Lamb 2000). Coined 'generativity' by developmental theorists, taking responsibility for caring for the next generation is thought to be an important life stage where the individual moves beyond self-interest to a broader conception of care (Bradford & Hawkins 2006). Involved fathering is thought, therefore, to lead to positive individual growth, building 'both better men and better children' (Brotherson, Dollahite & Hawkins 2005).

1.2   Australian fathers' time with children

There is a strong sense in the literature that the experience and practice of fatherhood in modern industrialised societies like Australia has undergone major transformations in recent decades.

While the majority of Australian fathers continue to define their role with reference to breadwinning (Russell et al. 1999), there is an expectation that contemporary fathers will be more involved in the lives of their children than men of previous generations. For example, in 1999, Russell and colleagues published their findings from a national audit of perspectives on fatherhood in Australia. As part of this study they constructed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 fathers with children aged 17 years or less. During telephone

interviews the majority of the fathers reported that they believed that men and women should share the responsibilities of child rearing equally. Men also rated being accessible to children, offering guidance and teaching children as the most important aspects of their role as fathers (Russell et al. 1999).

Alongside indications that constructions of fatherhood have significantly shifted to place greater value on involved fathering, there is also reason to suggest that traditional notions of parenthood (for example, mother as carer and nurturer and father as protector and provider) continue to exert powerful effects on how men and women approach and negotiate parenting roles.

While men may seem more visibly involved in child care (it is not uncommon to see fathers out by themselves or with their partners pushing strollers or carrying young babies), the available Australian evidence suggests that there are still large differences between the amounts of time mothers and fathers spend with their children and the types of care giving activities they engage in, and minimal change has occurred (Craig 2003).

In the study conducted by Russell and colleagues (1999), fathers were asked when they provided care to their child on a specific day. Only 15 per cent of fathers said they had been the main care giver for a period of time on the day they were asked to report on (Russell et al. 1999). Moreover, fathers shared child care equally in only about 1 to 2 per cent of families, and fathers were highly involved in about 5 to 10 per cent of families (Russell et al. 1999).

More recent time-use data from *Growing Up in Australia*, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), also suggests that while fathers' work demands are a big factor, fathers of infants (aged 3–19 months) and 4 year-old children spend considerably less time with their children than mothers. For example, on a typical weekday, infants spend seven hours and 48 minutes with their mother and two hours and 57 minutes with their father. On weekends these figures are seven hours and 55 minutes with their mother and five hours and 27 minutes with their father. On weekdays, 4 year olds spend six hours and 50 minutes with their mothers and two hours 48 minutes with their fathers, and on weekends mothers and children spend seven hours and 54 minutes and fathers and children spend five hours and 59 minutes. Moreover, mothers were more likely to share warm, positive interactions and activities with their children than fathers (Baxter, Gray & Hayes 2007).

1.3   Determinants of father involvement

Many men clearly want to be involved in their children's lives and invest heavily in their family relationships—yet there are substantial gaps between attitudes and actions. The following outlines some of the major determinants (and barriers) to father involvement.[2]

Social construction of fathers' roles

Social discourses surrounding involved and traditional constructions of fathering can be understood as the overarching context shaping how contemporary men practice fathering. Fatherhood and motherhood have historically been defined dichotomously in terms of contrasting and complementary roles, identities and traits (that is, the 'breadwinner' father and 'stay-at-home' mother). These broad stereotypes deeply penetrate cultural scripts about parenting and affect (consciously and subconsciously) how parenthood is performed and constructed at individual, interpersonal and institutional levels (Lupton & Barclay 1997). Traditional ideas about parenting affect men's predisposition and ability to be involved parents, and women's ability to let men be more involved, often referred to as 'gatekeeping' (Gaunt 2008).

Motivation and identity

Fathers exercise considerable self-determination in the extent to which they involve themselves in the care of their children. Cook et al. (2005) found that fathers who had strong expectations of being highly involved with their infant were more involved in care giving than men who did not anticipate being highly involved. Bouchard et al. (2007) explored fathers' self-motivation using identity theory and found that men engage in activities with their children because they feel that it is important to be involved and because they gain personal satisfaction from it. They found that fathers were more interested in being involved with their children's emotional and educational needs and less interested in responsibility for children's basic care needs (Bouchard et al. 2007).

The value to which both men and women assign the role of fathers is also thought to determine levels of father involvement. The internal investment in the identity (father) relative to other identities (that is, worker, son, husband) can explain levels of father involvement (Habib & Lancaster 2006). Investment in an identity is reinforced when others support and encourage behaviours and self-perceptions that fit within that identity (Henley & Pasley 2005). In this context the support of mothers, family members, family services, community members and work colleagues is important for promoting involved fathering.

Research also exists to suggest that the extent to which men invest in their identity as fathers varies according to economic factors, education, martial status and cultural background. In one United States study, Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano and Guzman (2006) found that economically disadvantaged fathers, less educated fathers, unmarried fathers and fathers from non-white American cultural groups tended to have less positive perceptions of their role.

Paid employment

Increased father involvement in contemporary societies is often associated with decreasing family sizes and increased female employment (Lupton & Barclay 1997). Volling and Belsky (1991), for example, argued that a significant factor determining levels of father involvement is the extent to which the father has to compensate for the unavailability of the mother. In their study of dual and single-income families, Volling and Belsky found that fathers whose partners were in paid employment engaged in more child care, taking up tasks that mothers were unavailable to perform (see also Sanderson & Sanders Thompson 2002). Conversely, in single-income families, the extent to which the father was engaged with his children relied upon his personality and attitudes about parenting.

Fathers also tend to perceive work and lack of job flexibility as a major impediment to spending time with their children. Russell et al. (1999) found that Australian fathers felt they experienced more difficulty than their female partners in balancing life and work, and that work often left them tired, preoccupied and stressed, and less able to engage with their family (see also Hand & Lewis 2002). LSAC data also show that while others factors are important, such as mothers' time in employment, family income and so on, fathers' shared time with their children tends to decrease when fathers spend long hours in paid employment (Baxter 2007).

Interpersonal factors

Commentators (for example, Lamb & Lewis 2004) have argued that family context, particularly the quality of the relationship between parents, is a key determinant of levels of father involvement. In one United States study, Henley and Pasley (2005) explored the role of parental relationships in father involvement among married and divorced men. They found that fathers in highly cooperative parental relationships were highly involved with their children, regardless of their satisfaction or investment in their father identity. Further, divorced fathers experiencing high levels of interparental conflict and little support, or active discouragement to enact their father identity had lower levels of involvement with their children. In another study of French Canadian fathers in dual-income families, more highly involved fathers had partners who displayed confidence in their parenting ability. This increased the father's sense of his own competence, his motivation to engage in parenting activities and, in turn, his levels of involvement with his children (Bouchard et al. 2007).

1.4 Engaging men in child and family services

Benefits of father engagement in child and family services

It is in the context of emergence of father involvement as a social value, and in the light of research indicating the positive outcomes associated with father involvement, that family and child-centred services are called upon to include a greater focus on fathers in their activities.

Although only a handful of formal evaluations have been conducted (see Cabrera & Peters 2000; Fletcher, Fairbairn & Pascal 2004), the available evidence suggests contact with services can be beneficial for increasing parenting skills and involvement among fathers (for example, Doherty, Erickson & LaRossa 2006; Fagan & Stevenson 2002; Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001; Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis 2003; Magill-Evans et al. 2007; UnitingCare Burnside 2003). Child and family services therefore have an important role to play in supporting fathers to be positively involved with their children and families, particularly in terms of building men's skills and confidence.

Levels of father engagement in child and family services

Engaging with fathers is a challenging task for many services and programs. In the United Kingdom, the evaluation of the Sure Start initiative produced a theme study exploring father participation in local Sure Start programs and the use of successful strategies for engaging men (Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis 2003). The study found that successful engagement of fathers was shown to be the exception rather than the rule, although many fathers did have 'arm's length' contact with programs, through their partners. Moreover, fathers did show a tendency to participate at a higher rate in fun activity-based sessions rather than discussion groups, and father participation in male-only sessions was higher than in mixed sessions. Few male workers were employed in contact roles.

It would also appear that the men who do access family and child support services are not necessarily the population who might benefit the most from them. The evaluation strategy employed in conjunction with the United States programs, Early Head Start and Head Start, found that fathers who were more likely to be involved in Early Head Start programs came from better functioning families, were more likely to be married, more likely to be involved in their child's education, had less dysfunctional interactions with children, and had female partners who rated as warmer in their interactions with children (Raikes, Summers & Roggman 2005).

Many reasons have been offered as to why fathers engage so little with child and family services. Some commentators (for example, Fletcher 2003; McAllister, Wilson & Burton 2004) suggest that the traditional dominance of women as the primary carers of children and thus service users, as well as the preponderance of women as service providers, has produced a service culture that actively excludes men. There is also the fact that fathers are much less likely than mothers to seek out health workers, community welfare professionals and parents' groups if they need support in their role as a carer (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001; Russell et al. 1999; Summers, Boller & Raikes 2004), and are likely to be unaware of services that could assist them (see Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001 for a comprehensive overview of the barriers affecting men's participation with family and parenting services).

There is a need, therefore, for child and family services to adapt in order to increase men's participation. This includes addressing operational issues as well as attitudes among professionals and fathers. Specifically, increasing father engagement means becoming more responsive and skilled at engaging fathers, delivering services that appeal to men's styles of interacting, focusing on what men can contribute to child wellbeing, involving male workers, and providing father-specific programs. For services to move forward in this way requires training, planning, action and shifts in thinking at multiple levels—for both practitioners and service users (Fletcher 2008). Various strategies advocated in the literature for enhancing men's access to family, parenting and child-orientated services are discussed below.

1.5   Strategies for improving engagement with a father client group

Improving engagement with a father client group relies on the ability of services and programs to promote a father-friendly image and market themselves as relevant to the interests and needs of fathers.[3]

Policy and training

Often services targeted at fathers are driven by highly motivated individuals or subject to short-term funding. As such, programs for men have a tendency to be a sideline operation to main service activities. To address this, father involvement needs to be integrated into core targets and activities (McAllister, Wilson & Burton 2004) and become a higher, planned-for priority on the agenda of service providers and staff (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001).

Evaluation data from the Head Start and Early Head Start programs in the United States have indicated the services that do best at engaging fathers have a well-developed and strategic approach for attracting men to their activities. These services had made an organisation-wide commitment to increasing father participation, providing staff with training on engaging fathers, and creating staff positions dedicated to involving fathers in the service's activities (Raikes, Summers & Roggman 2005).

Professional attitudes and staffing

Ambivalent and negative attitudes towards fathers are relatively common among welfare, health and education workers (Russell et al. 1999). By facilitating managers and staff to be more aware of fathers and to understand the positive effects that fathers can have on child wellbeing via discussion, training and policy, negative attitudes and preconceptions that act as a barrier to fathers' access to services can be addressed.

Engaging well with fathers also relies on the ability and willingness of professionals to form relationships with fathers. While female staff are able to engage well with fathers, it is often argued that the best way to engage fathers is through providing male workers, or through mentor learning where groups are facilitated by men who share common experiences (King 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004).

Adopting a strengths-based perspective

A strengths-based approach emphasises fathers' existing skills and their status as important people in the lives of their children and families. It also uses language that is relevant to the service users' needs, communicates faith in their abilities, acknowledges the importance of family relationships in men's lives and is honest and direct about important issues faced by service users (King 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004). A strengths-based approach uses solution-focused thinking and seeks to build on men's desire to have good, caring and moral relationships with their children (King 2005). This framework is useful not only in cases where specific problems exist, such as family violence, but also in the way in which general parenting and family services can assist men to recognise their competence as care givers, increase their confidence and build their skills.

Making services male friendly

Getting men in the door is often a major barrier for services wanting to set up or extend their activities to fathers, as men assume that the service is for women and children (O'Brien & Rich 2003). General services can use strategies such as displaying positive images of men and children at their facilities, developing brochures that target fathers, personalising correspondence to fathers (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004) and branding the service to appeal to fathers (O'Brien & Rich 2003). The presence of men in contact roles within an organisation may also help to impress upon service users that both men and women have a stake in family and child outcomes, and that both parents are welcome at the service.

While research relating to the extent to which fathers actually desire male-only services is conflicting, there is an assumption that men are more likely to share experiences and express feelings, views and concerns in the company of other men (Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis 2003; O'Brien & Rich 2003). Male workers, it is argued, are also better equipped to provide 'male friendly' resources, put men at ease when first coming into contact with a service, and build trusting relationships with father service users. Seeking to recruit more men in family and child-centred services is therefore an important issue. It is also important that appropriate males are available to work with specific groups such as Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) fathers for whom receiving information about parenting from a woman or man outside of their cultural group may be undesirable or inappropriate.

Providing services only during working hours is thought to be a barrier to fathers' engagement with services (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001). Holding sessions in the evenings or on weekends is an effective means of responding to this. In relation to transition-to-fatherhood services, research suggests that men are more receptive to receiving information about parenting after their baby has arrived (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001).

The literature also suggests that it is important to tailor services to men's learning and interaction styles. Men are not attracted to services they perceive as being for women (O'Brien & Rich 2003). It has also been argued that men are discouraged by professional interaction that they perceive to be hierarchical or judgemental (King 2005). As discussed above, improving engagement with men requires service provision that is based on notions of equality, highlights service users' existing strengths and is non-judgemental (O'Brien & Rich 2003). Men are also felt to benefit from peer-group learning and task-based activities firmly anchored in observable outcomes and results (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001).

Raising awareness

Where men are unaware of services, it is important to advertise in the places where they are likely to be. Workers can also seek to engage with fathers through incidental contact such as at community events, through their contact with the child and the mother, during home visits, or when the father picks the child up from school or day care. Recruiting enthusiastic fathers to promote the services through word-of-mouth and existing community networks can also be effective (King 2000).

Staff also require time to plan ways to access their specific population of fathers and need to be willing to trial different approaches. An experimental, community-based attitude to engaging with fathers is required (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001). Holding reference groups to identify fathers' needs and networking with existing services and community groups may be useful (King 2000; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004).

Assessment and evaluation

There is no single model for meeting the needs of fathers. A service working with men on family violence issues has to be different to one working with new fathers. Similarly, Indigenous and CALD fathers should be approached with their distinct needs in mind. The best approach a service can adopt is to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of their particular client group and treat engaging with fathers as a process that requires flexibility and ongoing assessment, evaluation and adjustment (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001). It is also extremely useful for services and programs to include in their service provision ongoing assessment and evaluation of father engagement. In this way they can measure success and build a knowledge base about what works in engaging with fathers (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001, see also King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004).

2 Aims and methodology

2.1 The research context

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS)

The overarching aims of the SFCS are to help families and communities build better futures for children; build family and community capacity; support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and improve communities' ability to help themselves. This study considered father engagement across three strands of the SFCS: Communities for Children (CfC), Invest to Grow (ItG) and Local Answers (LA).

Under the CfC initiative, non-government organisations were funded as Facilitating Partners (FPs) in 45 community sites around Australia to develop and implement a strategic and sustainable whole-of-community approach to early childhood development, in consultation with local stakeholders (referred to as the FP model). In implementing each local initiative, FPs established Communities for Children Committees and managed the overall funding allocation in their communities. Most of the funding was allocated to other local service providers called Community Partners (CPs) to deliver the activities identified in the local Community Strategic and Service Delivery Plans. This funding model was used in an effort to foster service coordination and cooperation and was based on the logic that service effectiveness is dependent not only on the nature and number of services, but also on the degree of service integration.

Another discrete component of the SFCS program, ItG, provided funding for early childhood programs and the development of tools and resource materials to be used by families, professionals and communities supporting families and young children. Like CfC, ItG had a prevention and early intervention focus. The program aimed to develop the Australian evidence base around these issues and support the expansion of successful program models.

The third strand to the SFCS program, LA, funded local, small-scale, time-limited projects that aimed to help communities identify opportunities to develop skills, support children and families and foster proactive communities. Local Answers also aimed to listen to local communities and use local knowledge and experience to develop effective, practical solutions to meet their particular needs. It aimed to build community capacity and develop initiatives that communities could create for themselves in partnership with local government, business and community organisations. The initiative funded a diverse range of projects. Some projects focused on early childhood, parenting and family relationships, while others concentrated on mentoring, leadership, volunteering and community building.

The national evaluation of the SFCS

The national evaluation of the SFCS comprises a number of integrated components. This study is the second of three themed evaluations (Indigenous and hard-to-reach groups are the other two overarching themes). Themed evaluations have been included in the evaluation design to allow flexibility to explore particular priority issues in-depth.

The choice of fathers for the second themed study is in response to awareness that, despite best intentions, it can be difficult to engage fathers in child and family services. It also recognises the need to address the issue by sharing good practices in engaging fathers with other programs and services across the SFCS.

2.2 Aims of the engaging fathers project

The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth, largely qualitative account of the nature and extent of fathers' involvement in selected SFCS programs. As a themed study, the aim was not to measure the effectiveness of individual programs but rather to describe the role of fathers in selected programs and identify successful strategies for engaging fathers.

Specifically, the research aimed to:

▸ quantify the extent to which fathers were engaging with SFCS programs and services

▸ understand the perceptions of fathers and fatherhood that inform service provision and the engagement of men

▸ gain insight, from the provider and consumer perspective, on how responsive services and programs were to the interests and needs of fathers, as well as insight into perceived outcomes

▸ identify unmet needs, challenges and good practice in engaging fathers.

2.3 Method

The aim of the study was to provide assessment and evaluation of father engagement with SFCS-funded child and family services. Although there was a strong focus on biological fathers, for our purposes the term 'father' was inclusive of stepfathers, grandfathers, the mothers' partners, non-biological gay parents and other men who are parenting (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001; Sullivan 2000).[4] Father involvement in the SFCS was operationally defined as fathers' participation in program activities such as attendance at group sessions, meetings with a professional or involvement in a management group.

There were two phases to the project. Phase 1 of the study was designed to gather information about the types of services and programs that fathers were involved in, the proportion of fathers involved, and strategies that services and programs were employing to facilitate father engagement. This involved mailing a self-complete survey about father engagement to relevant programs and services across the CfC, LA and ItG streams.

Phase 2 was an in-depth study of select services identified in phase 1. The research team conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with service managers, and visited service and program sites to hold focus groups with fathers and interviews with project facilitators and workers.

The objective of this qualitative research was to gather data from the different stakeholders about father participation in SFCS-funded services and programs. The aim was to explore how fathers perceive and explain their participation, and how service managers and facilitators/workers understand the fathers they work with and the issue of father engagement more broadly (see Ezzy 2002 for a rationale for the qualitative methodology). The use of focus group interviews enabled the researchers to gather rich insights into individual experiences and perceptions as well as to draw on group dynamics and processes to explore how issues emerged and were worked out as participants interacted with each other and the researchers (Travers 2006).

2.4 Sampling and recruitment

Phase 1 survey sample

All SFCS programs and services that targeted fathers specifically, targeted parents or families generally, or sought to engage parents in issues relating to child development and wellbeing, formed the population for the current study. We identified 223 LA and 20 ItG programs and services within scope of the study based on information supplied by FaHCSIA. FaHCSIA also sought feedback from ItG services as to whether they were interested in being involved in the study. As a result, only eight of the 20 ItG services were approached about the research. In the CfC sites, Facilitating Partners administer the activities of the Community Partners operating services and programs in the CfC areas. FaHCSIA contacted the Facilitating Partners on our behalf informing them of the study and requesting that they identify Community Partner activities that were likely to fall within the scope of the study. Thirteen of the 45 Facilitating Partners responded, identifying 22 Community Partners to whom the researchers could send the survey.

Early in 2008, surveys about engaging with fathers were mailed to CfC (22), LA (223) and ItG (8) program managers using service contact details provided by FaHCSIA (253 services in total). This correspondence included covering letters from FaHCSIA and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) explaining the study (Appendix A and B). Just prior to this correspondence, a courtesy letter was sent to the 13 Facilitating Partners to advise them of the timing of this contact (Appendix C). The father engagement survey itself is presented in Appendix D.

There were 59 returns, or a 23 per cent response rate. Of this number, 46 (78 per cent) were from LA services, three (5 per cent) were from ItG services, and 10 (17 per cent) were from CfC services. This distribution reflects the relatively greater number of LA projects that were mailed a survey: 223 (79 per cent) LA projects compared to eight (4 per cent) ItG services and 22 (17 per cent) CfC services. While returns were received from all states and territories, the majority were from New South Wales (n=20, 34 per cent) and Victoria (n=17, 28 per cent), again reflecting a higher proportion of surveys distributed in these states: 91 (36 per cent) and 64 (25 per cent) respectively. Services based in urban, regional, remote and rural locations were also represented in the survey responses, with some overrepresentation of services in rural areas.

In order to interpret sample representatives, inform the selection of programs for phase 2 of the study, and assist the analysis, the original 253 services were grouped according to their objectives (for example, parenting skills development, relationship building) and target population/s (for example, young parents, Indigenous parents). Codes were then assigned to each group (see Appendix E). All service types and client groups were adequately represented in the survey responses.

Phase 2 interview sample

Programs were selected for phase 2 of the study on the basis of responses to the phase 1 father engagement survey. At the end of the survey respondents had the opportunity to indicate whether or not they would be willing to participate in phase 2 of the study. Of those services that agreed to take part, a purposive sample of 15 potential services and programs was identified on the basis of two criteria. The first criterion was that fathers were directly involved in service or program activities. The second criterion was that the selected services and programs overall were to reflect, as far as possible, the diversity of programs and services identified in phase 1 of the study.

It was intended to conduct site visits with up to 10 programs and services involved in phase 1 of the study. Fifteen programs were included in the initial fieldwork sample to compensate for services and programs that declined to participate, were unable to recruit a group of fathers for a focus group, or had other commitments that prevented their participation in the study.

Eight services comprised the final fieldwork sample. Of the seven services that were not included, two services felt that asking their particular client group to participate was not appropriate; one was excluded because its program had not yet commenced, one no longer had fathers participating in program activities; and one service manager felt that her service would not make a useful contribution to the study. It was not possible to involve a further two services because they were not able to work within the timeframes for the study.

The phase 2 service sample is described in Table 1. It shows that two urban programs, one regional program, one remote program and four rural programs were included in the sample. Services were located in New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland. They targeted a diverse client base, including CALD fathers, fathers of children with additional needs, new fathers, young fathers and fathers in high-need communities. Six LA and two CfC services were included in fieldwork. Unfortunately, none of the ItG services that returned the survey were suitable to be included as they could not provide father participants for focus groups.

Table 1: Description of phase 2 interview sample

	Target service users	Service objectives	State/ territory	Location	SFCS stream[a]
1	High-need parents (children with additional needs)	Local support network building and parenting skills	NSW	Rural	LA
2	CALD parents (fathers)	Parenting skills	Vic	Urban	CfC
3	New parents (fathers)	Transition to parenthood and parenting skills	NSW	Rural	LA
4	High-need parents (economic disadvantage)	Parenting skills	NSW	Regional	LA
5	Young parents	Transition to parenting, parenting skills and playgroup	Qld	Rural	LA
6	High-need parents (economic disadvantage)	Healthy child development, local support network building	TAS	Urban	CfC
7	Fathers	Parenting skills, relationship building	SA	Remote	LA
8	Fathers and high-need parents (domestic violence issues)	Local network support, parenting skills and relationship building	NSW	Rural	LA

(a)   Once we began speaking to service managers, it became clear that several were overseeing other services funded through different streams of the SFCS. During interviews, managers did not make any meaningful distinctions between programs based on their funding source. Instead they talked more broadly about their aims, practice and experience.

Note: LA=Local Answers; CfC=Communities for Children.

Seventeen professionals were involved in phase 2 of the study. Seven managers (two male) participated in interviews. In addition, one male manager/facilitator was interviewed. Of the nine project facilitators/workers who were interviewed, three were male. One interview was also conducted with a female volunteer facilitator/service user at one of the project sites.

A flexible approach to gathering data was adopted to offer professionals different ways to participate in the study while minimising the demands placed on their time. A total of seven semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with program managers. Two telephone interviews were also held with project workers who were unavailable for a face-to-face meeting. A further four individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held with project workers and facilitators at their service sites. One face-to-face service site interview was conducted with a program manager/facilitator. One group interview was held with three project facilitators at their organisation's offices.

Groups of between two and 11 fathers participated in seven focus groups conducted across six service sites. One program was able to recruit fathers from two of their SFCS-funded projects and the focus groups were held separately. Another service was not able to recruit fathers for a focus group but requested to be involved in manager and facilitator interviews. Additionally, two individual telephone interviews were held with fathers who were involved with a service but unable to attend a focus group. A total of 34 fathers participated in the fieldwork.

As information was not collected on fathers who declined to participate, it is not known whether there were any systematic biases in the study's sample of fathers. However, in the interpretation of findings it should be borne in mind that the study may have attracted fathers who were already highly involved with their children and highly dedicated to being involved in their children's lives. Additionally, the focus groups may have engaged fathers for whom contact with services and programs had been a positive experience. As such, the findings may have limited applicability for fathers who are more ambiguous about being an active presence in their children's lives, or for fathers who have had less positive experiences with services and programs.

Basic demographic information was collected from fathers who participated in the fieldwork. The fathers ranged in age from 20–62 years (M=35 years). The fathers had between one and five children (M=2). Just over half (56 per cent, n=19) of the sample were married while 23 per cent (n=8) reported that they were in de facto relationships. Of the remaining fathers, 12 per cent (n=4) and 9 per cent (n=3) respectively identified themselves as single or separated.

In terms of employment, 73 per cent (n=25) of the fathers stated that they were working, 24 per cent (n=8) stated that they were not working and 3 per cent (n=1) did not respond to the question. Just under half (47 per cent, n=17) of the participants were in full-time employment, 18 per cent (n=6) worked part-time and nine per cent (n=3) worked casually.

The fathers were also asked about their educational background. Less than half (41 per cent, n=14) had completed either a university or a TAFE qualification. One-quarter (26 per cent, n=9) of the fathers stated that they had completed their education to a Year 9 level or below. Approximately one-fifth (18 per cent, n=6) of the fathers had completed their education to Year 10, while 9 per cent (n=3) had completed Year 12 and 6 per cent (n=2) declined to respond to the question.

To gain a sense of the fathers' cultural and ethnic identities, the fathers were also asked if they spoke any languages other than English at home. While 5 per cent (n=19) reported that they did not speak any other language, 44 per cent (n=15) reported speaking another language at home. Languages and dialects identified included Telugu, Italian, Dari, Farsi, Pushto, Cerdu, Hazaragi and Persian. Two participants stated that they did speak another language but did not identify it. One participant (3 per cent of the sample) identified himself as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent.

While the study aimed to include ATSI services in phase 2, very few completed surveys were received from ATSI services, and it was not possible to conduct interviews with staff or clients from these services primarily due to the tight timeframe for the study. However, this should not be construed as meaning that ATSI fathers were not engaged under the SFCS. During the fieldwork, service providers discussed various communities where successful and respected work was being conducted with Indigenous fathers. It is also significant that none of the fathers who participated in the fieldwork indicated that they were the sole care giver of their child/ren. It is possible, therefore, that the current findings do not extend to these special groups of fathers, and should be read with this caution in mind.

Phase 2 recruitment methodology

Program managers

Returning a completed survey served as consent for program managers to be contacted regarding phase 2 of the study. Researchers telephoned the selected programs and services to thank them for returning the survey and to canvas their interest in being included in phase 2 of the research. Managers were asked to provide verbal consent to participate in a telephone interview and facilitate access to project facilitators and father participants. Verbal consent was considered sufficient as project managers had already indicated their written consent to be contacted by researchers on the initial survey.

Telephone interviews were recorded using a commercial teleconferencing service. Interviewees were informed that an external recording service was being employed to provide a sound file of the interview. The interviewee was asked to provide their verbal consent for the recording to continue. The confidentiality of participants was maintained through a verbal agreement with the teleconferencing service that the operators would not listen in to the interviews. Further, sound files of the interviews were immediately removed from the service's computer system as soon as researchers had downloaded the sound file of each interview. These files were then forwarded to a professional transcription service for documentation. The program manager interview schedule is presented in Appendix F.

Program facilitators

Program managers provided written information to program facilitators about the study on AIFS's behalf (Appendix G). Workers were then contacted by telephone to seek their involvement in the study and assistance in recruiting fathers where required. Workers were read a plain language statement (Appendix H) when they met with researchers and asked to sign a consent form (Appendix I) agreeing to both their informed participation and the recording of the interview. Two program workers were unavailable for face-to-face interviews and instead participated in telephone interviews. In these cases, participants provided their consent verbally. The program facilitator interview schedule is presented in Appendix J. Interviews with program facilitators were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Fathers

Program managers and facilitators were asked to assist in the recruitment of fathers to the study. A flexible approach to gathering data was adopted and fieldwork visits were arranged at the convenience of services and programs. Facilitators circulated written material about the study to fathers. They had the opportunity to read the material and follow-up with AIFS researchers if they had any questions. Father participants were read a plain language statement (Appendix H) when they met with researchers and asked to sign a consent form (Appendix I) agreeing to both their informed participation and the recording of the focus group. At the end of the focus group interview participants were given a $50 gift voucher in recognition of the time they contributed to the study. The focus group interview schedule is presented in Appendix K. Focus group interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

A professional interpreter was used for one focus group with fathers from a Victorian service targeting a specific CALD population. The need for an interpreter was discussed and agreed upon during telephone contact with the program facilitator. Prior to the focus group interview, the interpreter translated the plain language statement.

3 Analysis and results

3.1 Analysis

Individual items on the father engagement survey were analysed to provide a description of the proportion of fathers participating in SFCS programs, the types of activities that fathers were involved in, and the types of strategies services used to engage fathers in their service.

Thematic analysis enabled the researchers to use the interview and focus group data to lead the process of analysis (Ezzy 2002). Program manager, facilitator and focus group transcripts were first organised by a process of open coding, which involved identifying patterns, themes and categories within the texts. These codes were then refined through axial coding, leading to the refinement of themes and categories and the emergence of subcategories (Willis 2006). To enhance methodological rigour and inter-coder reliability, two researchers coded data.

3.2 Phase 1 findings

Father participation in SFCS child and family services

Two items were included in the father engagement survey, which asked about the proportion of parents/carers **currently involved** in the service who were fathers, and the proportion of parents/carers involved in the service **over the past 12 months** who were fathers. The findings from these items are presented in Table 2. The data suggest considerable variation in father participation across all types of programs, with perhaps the lowest participation in services targeting new parents and Indigenous parents. Only a small proportion of fathers were involved in services targeting single parents; however, this is likely to reflect the relatively low proportion of single males who are 'primary' parents. It should be noted, however, that the raw number of fathers involved across all programs is quite low, which can distort the results.

Table 2: Minimum and maximum proportions of father participation by client population

Client code	Min–max (current participation)		Min–max (over the last year)	
Indigenous parents	10–30%	(n=3)	10–30%	(n=3)
CALD parents	0–20%	(n=6)	5–20%	(n=5)
Parents—general	6–40%	(n=13)	6–50%	(n=13)
New parents	1–47%	(n=3)	10–47%	(n=2)
Fathers	21–100%	(n=9)	21–100%	(n=10)
Young parents	1–86%	(n=9)	10–27%	(n=8)
High-need parents	2–86%	(n=13)	1–50%	(n=12)
Grandparents (social fathers)	40%	(n=1)	40%	(n=1)
Single parents	0%	(n=0)	13%	(n=1)
Parents with children with challenging behaviours	50%	(n=1)	50%	(n=1)

The survey instrument was also designed to gather descriptive data about the types of activities fathers were involved in and what strategies services were using to enhance father engagement. Responses were again organised in terms of client population, and are presented in Table 3. These data suggest father involvement in a wide variety of activities, ranging from the more 'fun' activities such as festivals, cooking classes, dance groups and family outings to family-focused interventions including outreach services, as well as parent–child focused services such as playgroups and parent–child activities at school. Fathers also took part in parent education sessions and workshops and had individual counselling in relation to personal issues such as anger management.

It also appeared that the various activities were used regardless of the client population, although as one might expect, there was an emphasis on more intensive, case-management style services for young parents, more play-based style programs aimed at children with challenging behaviours, and outreach and whole-of-family focused programs catering to the particular needs of Indigenous families with children.

Table 3: Father involvement in program activities across client groups

Client code	Main activities in which fathers have participated
Indigenous parents	Whole-of-family approach to promoting the health of young Indigenous children, outreach work with families experiencing domestic violence, family outings and cooking workshops.
CALD parents	Parenting courses, fathers' groups, multicultural playgroups, parents' support groups, educational support for young parents and support for parents to assist them in supporting their children's learning and education.
Parents—general	Parenting courses, activity groups, community development groups, support groups, cooking classes, family outings, child nutrition courses, community events and activities, playgroups, newsletter networks, adult education, dance groups, men's mentoring groups, early intervention education and playgroups, family mediation and case management support.
New parents	New parent groups, peer support groups, playgroups and antenatal and postnatal parenting education programs and seminars.
Fathers	Discussion groups, 'Pit Stop Fathers Education' programs, fathers' groups, 'Dads and Kids' playgroups, antenatal and postnatal classes, anger management courses, counselling, dads in schools programs, transition to parenthood courses, workplace-based parenting programs, the fatherhood festival, home visiting programs, support groups, parenting programs and cooking programs.
Young parents	Individual support and case management, antenatal classes, support groups, parenting classes, supported playgroups, family outings and community events and counselling.
High-need parents	Fathers' support groups, parenting courses, anger management courses, supported playgroups, family outings, counselling, parent and child activities at schools, support for parents to assist them in supporting their children's learning and education, mentoring, life skill development (that is, employment, budgeting, household management), relationship strengthening activities, support and information and community development.
Grandparents	Support groups, carer–child activities and case management.
Single parents	Fathers' program and playgroups.
Parents with children with challenging behaviours	Supported playgroups, early intervention and Indigenous programs.

Program managers also reported on the types of strategies used to engage fathers in the relevant programs and activities. Table 4 illustrates the 11 strategies managers documented and the frequency of services using the approach. It appears that scheduling services outside normal business hours was the primary approach adopted to engage fathers. Employing male workers and facilitators and developing father-specific services and programs were the other two main approaches for connecting with fathers. It was also significant that 19 per cent of services did not employ any strategy to include fathers.

Table 4: Strategies for enhancing father engagement

Strategy	n (%)[a]
Undertook activities outside business hours or at time convenient to father participants	26 (44%)
Employed male worker/s or male workshop presenters	20 (34%)
Developed father-specific services and programs	16 (27%)
Displayed positive images of fathers and fatherhood at facilities and activities	11 (19%)
No strategies	11 (19%)
Used father inclusive language and images in promotional activities and/or branding of program/service	10 (17%)
Provided staff development/training on father inclusion	8 (14%)
Used advertising, pamphlets or other reading materials targeted at fathers	6 (10%)
Issued invitations to activities and events addressed to, or inclusive of, fathers	5 (8%)
Organised father and child activities	4 (7%)
Used male volunteers as role models/mentors	2 (4%)

(a) Figures allow for multiple responses on strategies employed to engage fathers.

3.3 Phase 2 findings

Presentation of findings

The interview and focus group transcripts were coded so that it was possible to cross-reference the service site with manager, facilitator and father participant transcripts. Whether an interview was conducted over the telephone or face-to-face is indicated by the appearance of (t) or (f) in the coding label. A table outlining the coding of all interviews and focus groups is included as Appendix L.

The analysis of interview material gathered from service managers, facilitators and father participants generated a range of perspectives on five major themes: perceptions of fatherhood and fathering; barriers to successful engagement of fathers; effective strategies for recruiting fathers; good practice in program implementation; and the benefits of father involvement in child and family services.

3.4 Perceptions of fatherhood and fathering

> **'Not enough fathers get involved with their kids ... [Children] need to see their fathers be a part of their lives, rather than sit back, go out and earn a living and do nothing else.'**
>
> **Father participant**

As discussed in the introduction, much of the literature on contemporary fathering and fatherhood argues for the transformation of fatherhood in recent times, specifically citing the emergence of the caring or involved father ideal (Bjornberg 1992). From the roles fathers play even before their child is born, right through to their relationships with their partners, there appears to be a new emphasis not only on what men can do for their family but what men **should** be doing. The data gathered in this study certainly aligned with the idea that fathers should be actively involved in child rearing and family life.

The changing face of fathering

Program managers, facilitators and fathers all articulated that fathers today **should** be engaged in child rearing. All challenged traditional notions of fatherhood. The following comment was typical of professionals' views:

> '... the traditional roles of men working and earning the bread and coming home and having minimal contact with children—life's changed. It's very different these days. I think men want to engage. Parenting is very different now to even when I grew up. Fathers do engage much more ...'
>
> Service manager interview 4 (t): Site 4

Comments from fathers also supported the idea that the roles of men and women in society had altered:

> '... back then they thought women should stay in the home and cook food. Well, that's just rubbish. They've got just as much rights as we do. They come out into the workforce and stuff like that; why can't we go into what they were doing?'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

> 'Not enough fathers get involved with their kids, [they] go back to the old viewpoint, me man, me tough, me go out and do work, that's it ... they [children] need to see their fathers be a part of their lives, rather than sit back, go out and earn a living and do nothing else.'
>
> Father participant focus group 5: Site 6

Perceived benefits of father involvement

The importance of involved fathers from a child development perspective was vigorously asserted among all types of respondents:

> '... when fathers are more engaged [children are] academically better, there's less child abuse ... they're financially better off, they're psychologically better off. If you look through the teenage years, fathers who are more actively involved in their children's lives are less likely to appear in court, are less likely to have misdemeanours.'
>
> Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3

> '... it [father involvement] has such a profound effect on children. Every positive effect that is imaginable ... children get so much benefit out of spending time with their dad in a really positive way. It's not hard.'
>
> Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2

> 'I also think it [father involvement] helps the kids mentally, like my dad is there for me, he comes and helps me ...'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

There was also a sense that the efforts of some fathers to be positively involved in child rearing stem from their own negative childhood experiences:

> 'I had a shitty upbringing, so I didn't have much to work with for starters, all I knew was I wasn't going to be like my dad.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

Another father in this group expressed a similar sentiment:

> 'My mum and dad split up when I was 12 and he was pretty abusive and a drunk, so I just over the years tried not to do what he did. Sometimes I fail, but I try. Try not to make those mistakes. I always try and make sure I've got time for the girls and stuff ... we find ways of spending time together—even doing the dishes.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

Perceptions of fathers' needs

There was certainly a perception among service providers that fathers benefit from support and encouragement to come to terms with their role as father and to actively and positively engage in child rearing. Professionals spoke of fathers' needs in terms of the specific population they served, as well as the type of community in which their programs operated. One program manager commented that fathers can have multiple personal and other issues that affect their capacity to be positively involved in child rearing:

> 'They have all of the possible things you could imagine—financial barriers, housing, stable housing, affordable housing, health issues, mental health, family disconnection and breakdown, everything. You name it, they've had it.'
>
> Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2

Other comments from providers highlighted the specific needs of fathers with children with disabilities and of young fathers:

> 'The particular needs for our clients ... include having more knowledge of their children's disability and how they can work with it.'
>
> Service manager interview 1 (t): Site 1

'Sometimes when they [young men] find their partner pregnant that can be an issue because [of] … problems between the father and the pregnant partner in his role as becoming a dad.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 5 (t): Site 5</div>

In the eyes of another project manager, access to time alone with children to develop confidence in their role as a parent can be an issue:

'… to spend time alone with their children. That would be something that they find daunting and at the same time really satisfying … Societal expectations quite often are that the dad is still the protector/provider and under the protector/provider banner there's often not a lot of room for being the protector, provider and nurturer.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3</div>

Fathers living in disadvantaged communities were also likely to experience issues of social isolation. Involvement in a program or service provided them with opportunities for positive community connections:

'… living particularly where I live, it's not the greatest community in the world, there are a lot of family breakdowns going on and the police were doing the block around our couple of streets for most of last night … so coming here allows you to interact with parents and kids that want to get out of that environment, or not necessarily be a part of it.'

<div align="right">Father participant focus group 4: Site 6</div>

Another father in this group commented:

'If nothing more, you get to get out of the house. I know for a long time before we started coming here it would be just so monotonous, sitting in on top of each other every day and what have you with three kids … So it's something you look forward to each week, or at least I do.'

<div align="right">Father participant focus group 4: Site 6</div>

3.5 Barriers to successful service provision

'… culturally I think it's quite difficult for an Australian male to accept that he might need some teaching around the fathering bit.'

<div align="right">**Program facilitator**</div>

Despite the many needs of fathers, service providers face real challenges in connecting men to services from which they are likely to benefit. A number of individual and societal factors were cited as barriers to the full engagement of fathers.

Gender stereotyped attitudes and values

Service providers realise that they must overcome entrenched beliefs and perceptions relating to social constructions of gender roles held by both men and women:

'… I found in working with these groups is that it's kind of okay for mums to be out and about during the day with their children. That's a legitimate activity for a female. But often dads, especially if they're unemployed or whatever, don't like to be visible. It's like you're on show to the world. Especially in situations like the neighbourhood house or whatever where there's heaps of women … Here I am at the neighbourhood house when all the other men are off working.'

<div align="right">Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6</div>

One father also felt that there was a social perception that men are not natural nurturers:

'I mean that's a very big generalisation but it just seems like there is a fear of, I don't know what to do with the baby. What if it cries? I'm not going to know what to do. It's not going to be pacified by me because it only wants milk or only wants its mother. There are all these perceptions, which are not true.'

<div align="right">Father participant focus group 3: Site 3</div>

The extent to which men's identities are tied to their role as a father was also raised in the context of barriers to father engagement:

> 'Other things affect them more—unemployment or increasing their skills or training, financial burdens are going to be more of a priority for them and then they've got the cultural barriers where it's not considered their role, it's not valued as a role.'
>
> Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2

Traditional views about masculinity and help-seeking

Both providers and fathers perceived unwillingness among males generally to acknowledge their support needs and seek professional help:

> 'Because it is just not part of the Australian male psyche to ask for help and support. It is still a huge stigma and a sense of failure, that I have failed, that it is not part of what we do as blokes.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 6 (f): Site 8

> '… [Australian] men don't want to be whingers … you talk about something everyone thinks you're a whinger. You don't want to be a whinger and you don't want to be weak and you don't want to be emotional.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 3 (f): Site 3

Comments from one of the fathers echoed this facilitator's perception:

> 'I thought it was gay, to be honest with you. I thought it was not on—a bunch of blokes getting together and having a whinge … it is just girlish. You see men who do cry and you are just like "No; not right". Yes I guess, for me personally, I would not go to a men's group because I would have to go there and be the centre of attention and talk. And a part of the stigma of being in a poofy man's group …'
>
> Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

Another father spoke about how men could move beyond hegemonic constructions of masculinity and accept support:

> 'A man's got pride. He's supposed to carry all the burdens and that's their mindset. It's not right but that's their mindset that the men should be the breadwinner and the tough person and all that. Until we get past that stigma and realise you're just normal, you're just human, you've got to be there for your kids …'
>
> Father participant focus group 6: Site 7

Mother-oriented service culture

There were many aspects to the 'traditional' culture of child and family service provision, which were thought to be alienating to men. These included assumptions that women are the primary carers and service users:

> '… many times dads feel threatened by any community service or activity. It's run by women. Women set it up in a way that's comfortable to them.'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

> '… they're not … father friendly … if you go into a community hall or a community room you will often see pictures of mothers and babies. You will rarely see pictures of fathers and babies so they're not father-friendly. A lot of the workers there, they're brilliant workers and I have nothing wrong to say about them, but they've been brought up in an era, quite often where fathers were not traditionally involved and so they find it difficult to change their thinking around that …'
>
> Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3

Professionals also told anecdotes about men who had attended groups but felt uncomfortable:

> 'He [client] tried to go to normal playgroups. He's a young, really approachable guy, but he said, "I just couldn't find my place. They made me uncomfortable." He found himself sitting outside the circle because that's where they put him.'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

Cultural appropriateness

Providers serving fathers from CALD backgrounds also commented on the lack of culturally appropriate services:

> '… sometimes there are services that sound really good for mainstream people but for different people—from a different background—it might not be suitable for them. Also language barriers … I had the feedback, I remember from some of the fathers, like when we were talking about things in the class they said that when we do it in our own language it seems very easy. When we go to English classes and we talk about something very simple, but we don't get it …'
>
> Project facilitator interview 2 (f): Site 2

Lack of knowledge about services

Fathers also suggested that information about services was not reaching those who were not proactively seeking help:

> '… because just getting the information that these sorts of things are out there isn't that widely available, unless you know where to look a lot of the time you'd really miss them. So those that are in the know take advantage of them [programs and activities], but there are still a lot of people that don't know that all this stuff is out there.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

> 'But what is there for men is hard to access because it's not publicised enough. The things that are there for men should be more publicised.'
>
> Father participant focus group 6: Site 7

Work as a barrier

Fathers also reported that there might be a difficulty in fathers accessing services for work-related reasons:

> 'The biggest problem we have is that a lot of fathers work, so that makes it hard because it's held through the working week.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

> 'It's a hard one because a lot of males that I know of anyway are working most of the time so they can't go.'
>
> Father participant interview 1 (t): Site 5

Transport barriers

In several local areas, professionals and fathers talked about how lack of transport and commuting times were a barrier to men's access:

> 'Location wise, because some young dads I know, just in general some young parents that I know don't have cars and sometimes it's just too far away, you just can't get there—you can't catch a lift with someone or something.'
>
> Father participant interview 2 (t): Site 5

> 'Yeah well if it was further away I would have to think about whether I could get there or not.'
>
> Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

3.6   Effective strategies for recruiting fathers

> **'… you need to be smart about how you connect with dads.'**
>
> **Program manager**

Interviews with providers and fathers highlighted a number of strategies likely to be successful in overcoming barriers to recruiting fathers to relevant programs and services.

Utilising key community-based services and organisations

A number of providers mentioned the importance of tapping into the networks of other local service providers and community groups to disseminate information about services:

> 'The [ethnic group] would be making direct approaches to people and service providers who might want to refer [ethnic group] families so all the case workers know when the next program is going to be running and they might refer in and promote it to the people they're seeing ... Some key service providers are also given the information but the [ethnic group] community often promote it at church groups and community gatherings.'
>
> Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2

> 'For one of the [programs] we had a link-in with Centrelink who knew via their records which dads were on a sole parents benefit and so on. Centrelink was willing to send out letters on our behalf; they would include our publicity with their letters. It's great when you can do that, but it usually requires a hell of a lot of negotiation to be able to get to that point.'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

Services were also able to successfully recruit fathers to new programs by nesting their service within an already existing service:

> '[The program] wasn't an additional event. It was built into something that already existed ... I think if we were trying to build something new we wouldn't have got the dads to come along. But because it was already a structure, and already dads were there ...'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

> '... they have a six week antenatal class where the mums and dads go to on a Wednesday night and then we pull the dads out, they self-select or volunteer to come to a dads only program.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 3 (f): Site 3

In line with the views of providers, fathers certainly reported that they found out about services through contact with another community-based agency:

> 'I was down at [service] ... and the lady over the counter said "Oh, there's also the father's course, do you want to join in on that too?" So I read the brochure and it sounded really good.'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

Passing of information from one father to another

Word-of-mouth from the participants themselves emerged as one of the most effective recruitment vehicles:

> 'A lot of it is that word-of-mouth thing. You have to be seen in the community, they have to get to know you, trust you, and that took a lot of time to build up that rapport. Once you've got a couple involved the rest comes a bit more easily. Just that first one, once you've got one, so you can say to the next one "Oh, we've already got a dad coming along." Then of course for the first few sessions they just pal up and talk to each other then gradually you get more dads and more dads.'
>
> Service manager interview 6 (t): Site 6

> 'Men respond much better to some other fellow saying "Hey, you should go along to this, these people are good." If that happens then they'll go ...'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

The value of engaging fathers through word-of-mouth resonated with the fathers themselves:

> 'I guess the things that appealed to me was more about hearing it [service] from other dads.'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

Utilising children and children's services

Using children to encourage fathers to participate in different activities was also not an uncommon strategy:

> '… the example of using the kindies [kindergarten] to link in that way is good. And I guess we use a bit of a—I wouldn't say guilt—but the way we do it is we actually make it like the invitation's coming from the child. So we print out the invitation and we get the child to draw a picture on there and—put this on the fridge to remind you about this day coming up. Then there's a tear-off slip—you know, I will be coming with so-and-so to kindy on this day for the dads' session.'
>
> Service manager/facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7

Promoting services in workplaces and other 'male spaces'

Some services suggested placing advertisements in male spaces such as workplaces, pubs and hardware stores:

> '… we also have some advertising in places where men go, you know for example, we have little coasters in pubs, that sort of thing.'
>
> Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3

> '… it's to go where the men are and to advertise in men locations, like [a hardware store] for example.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4

> '… you can try and connect in through work places … when we did the [activity] we actually sent a letter to all businesses within [local area] and asked them whether they would consider allowing fathers to start a little bit later or make up some time, or have an RDO [rostered day off] …'
>
> Service manager/facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7

Effective marketing strategies

The way the program is branded and the language used to market the program were thought to impact on father engagement:

> 'I guess when you're badged with a particular agency … as an example, with [agency], often the perception in the community is that we're there to help the less fortunate in the community. So they [fathers] might sort of … [think] okay, I'm not going to go along.'
>
> Service manager/facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7

> 'I think that men traditionally—and are still to a large extent—leery of coming along to—especially group activities—and are very leery of talking about feelings and especially if it might have a therapy feel to it. So, we try to avoid words like that. In fact [the naming of the project] … was quite deliberate, to try and right—straight off with the name of the project—to attract men by that very word.'
>
> Service manager interview 4 (t): Site 4

Highlighting program benefits

Men were regarded by professionals to be outcome focused, so by clearly and concretely highlighting the benefits that men will get out of the program, services feel they were better able to attract fathers:

> '… when we put out the fliers, we make it very clear exactly what the workshop will be on and what we hope people will gain by coming to the workshop. So the dads have some sense that it's not a nebulous thing, they're not just coming along to get support. We don't use the word support. But they're going to actually learn strategies on a, b, c, d.'
>
> Service manager interview 6 (t): Site 6

Fathers also highlighted the important role that wives and partners have in prompting their engagement in services.

> 'For me my wife found out for me when she was thinking about which antenatal class to go to. They gave us some information and she said I think you should go to this and I said "I think I should".'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

'We had a woman come up, probably three years ago, and she said "We've just moved to [area]. I've heard about the [service]. My husband sits at home all day and has nothing to do." Since the first day—he came three years ago—he has not missed a day.'

Father participant focus group 6: Site 7

3.7 Good practice in program delivery

'I have been having people chase me down from state to state trying to get me to listen otherwise they are taking my kids. It was just the honesty and the openness of [worker] and the other blokes that just made me realise I was not alone.'

Father

A number of aspects of program delivery were highlighted as important to sustain the engagement of fathers and to ensure positive service outcomes. These included rapport building, catering to men's learning styles, specific attributes of the program facilitators, qualities of the program venue, and hours of operation.

Rapport building through sharing experiences

Relationship building (the development of trust between fathers and workers and among the father participants themselves) appeared to be the cornerstone to successful engagement of fathers. From both a provider and father perspective, the most powerful way of doing this was for the facilitator to speak about his own experiences:

'They [facilitators] need to be able to share from their own personal experience. Because one of the greatest ways to alienate men is to be the expert and to not share from your own life situation ... From our point of view, and particularly from my personal point of view, it is the way you build trust with men. You have got to be prepared to disclose certain aspects of your own life so they go "Wow you have been through it too mate".'

Project facilitator interview 6 (f): Site 8

One father powerfully expressed the importance of facilitators engaging with fathers at their own level, and being able to share their own experiences and empathise with the experiences of fathers:

'You guys, you are here [because] you have got the problem. But we all have problems, including the facilitator. It is the honesty, and the willingness to open up and they have been through the same shit. They are just as human ... Our [agency] worker had never had a kid, she was 23. No kids. I have got five. So the experiences, they are willing to share themselves. That is what stopped me.'

Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

Other fathers shared similar sentiments:

'Workers ... they all share their own experience with me, which makes it comfortable for me. No matter what I tell them, how bad it is what I have done; there is no quick facial expression. You are not made to feel like oh yeah you prick ... the reality is that they honestly do not judge you at all. They honestly believe that there but for the grace of God go I.'

Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

Strengths-based approach

There was certainly a perspective among providers that a strengths-based approach is best when working with men.

'So it is always ensuring that the men—they are the experts in their lives and I am not—ensuring that they are empowered to be proactive and respectful and to stay engaged with their families, their children and themselves; their lives ... Even when a man's behaviour needs to be challenged, to have them do that in a respectful manner.'

Project facilitator interview 6 (f): Site 8

In their own words, fathers also acknowledged the importance of strengths-based practice approach:

> 'Because of the socioeconomic group that come along or take advantage of these sort of groups, they are sort of in the lower income groups, probably not as well educated as a lot of the population, so if you start pointing out all the negatives all the time, like this is an anger management group, this one is for depression, basically listing every single problem you've got in life ... you just wind up getting really annoyed and really angry about it ... just being social gives you that bit of more self-esteem and you might be able to go and get some help yourself.'
>
> Father participant focus group 1: Site 5

> 'I felt like [worker] said it without saying it that life is never really going to be the same. You're going to have to work harder than you have as a man of the house, but he never actually used those words. But I feel like I was left with that impression the gentle way.'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

Anti-expert approach

Facilitators felt it was important for fathers that professionals do not adopt the role of an expert. Rather, facilitators should aim to build relationships with fathers and make them feel comfortable:

> 'It's no good an expert going in because the message just won't get there. It's about developing that relationship so there's not some bigwig standing up in front of the dads sprouting something they're totally disinterested in because they don't know this person, they don't trust this person, they don't have a relationship with this person.'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

> 'I'm not the expert, I'm just there to facilitate the session and they can learn from each other. So then when they walk out of these classes, it gives them an experience that they've actually got something from another man or another dad and you don't necessarily have to have a PhD in fatherhood or, whatever, to give advice, which is a big thing for me.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 3 (f): Site 3

Catering to male interaction and learning styles

Several project facilitators indicated that men have definite preferences in terms of interaction styles:

> 'Men often prefer to stand side-by-side and talk or sit side-by-side rather than face-to-face.'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

> '... what often works really well with men is to have conversations alongside them rather than face-to-face. The fathers in focus project that we ran, we included a lot of barbecues. So the men were cooking while they were talking. They were doing things with their children while they were talking.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4

A facilitation style that encourages peer learning was also highlighted:

> 'There was a lot of peer role-playing, and peer-to-peer learning in that experience. That was the most valuable thing that I learnt from it. Sure I can be there, but the experience was with the men learning from the men. Men learn differently.'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

A 'hands-on' approach to learning was also reported to work well with men, where the knowledge gains are incidental and opportunistic:

> '... we've found the dads enjoy the hands-on stuff much better ... So they like activities, they like things where they know what's expected of them, they liked to be asked to do things ... When you've got a group of mums they are quite happy to sit around informally and have a chat, whereas dads ... almost feel like they're wasting their time if they just sit and chat ...'
>
> Service manager interview 6 (t): Site 6

'… the first session I turned up and said, "Right we're going to do an hour of lecture, then we're going to cook." By the end of that first session they said to me, "Sit down, we don't want this, this is crap. We just want to cook." From then on, I realised that as soon as we got there we would start cooking straight away. Within that cooking experience was when we started to raise some questions around healthy eating and lifestyle stuff. I'd raise the question, for example, "So what do you guys think about watching television and physical activity?" That would start them all talking.'

<div align="right">Project facilitator group interview (f): Site 6</div>

'A lot of males—give them a piece of paper of information, they'll just put it in the bin. The best times we have up here is when we have a casual day where we just chat. Chat days, we can talk about depression, we can talk about parenting, we can talk about drugs, we can talk about alcohol, and by just having a chat between the groups, they all have their little bits to say. But if you get a facilitator to come in that they've never met before and do their thing on drugs or parenting and all of that, they sort of back off or they don't turn up.'

<div align="right">Father participant focus group 5: Site 6</div>

Attributes of workers

A wide range of worker attributes were linked to successful engagement with fathers, including personal qualities, experience dealing with and working with men, the ability to relate through personal experience, expertise in the program content, relationship-building skills, group work skills and organisational skills:

'To be able to communicate well with males and have an understanding of their perspectives. Group work skills, general family work skills.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 1 (t): Site 1</div>

'They need to know and understand the communities they're working with and have good links with them and be respected by them. They need to speak the language.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2</div>

'I think being empathetic and genuine are very crucial skills. And being respectful and non-judgemental … across the board basically …'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 5 (t): Site 5</div>

'I know this sounds strange, but they actually [need to] like men. That's a really important thing that, you know, that they actually enjoy the company of men and like men.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3</div>

Some service providers also felt that it was important for workers and facilitators to be a father and/or male:

'I think they need to be fathers themselves. They need to be—to have that—I guess it's the old thing where—or hang on, how can you tell me about this 'cause you've never been in my situation, or you don't understand what it is to—you haven't got children yourself so how can you be—so I think that's one of the prerequisites for it.'

<div align="right">Service manager/facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7</div>

'There are a lot of guys that do prefer to talk to a male. For some who are having difficulties with women to then face a women's orientated looking centre and be met by another woman. They would really benefit from talking to men.'

<div align="right">Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4</div>

'Male friendly' spaces

To help overcome male preconceptions of services catering mainly to the needs of women, some services have made very conscious moves to create spaces where men feel comfortable:

'… pictures of dads and their children hanging on the wall. Colours that are neutral. Colours that are not … for example, pastels and things like that have a particular gender feel so we try to go for neutral, neutral colours, actual pictures of dads.'

<div align="right">Service manager interview 3 (t): Site 3</div>

While the type of program will dictate where it should ideally be delivered, there was also a strong sense that men prefer programs to be delivered in more male-orientated environments.

'... they prefer to be out in the park somewhere. So their idea of playgroup is to be not in a centre. Not around a table drinking coffee or playing with their child reading a book. So their idea of an activity or spending quality time with their child is in the park doing physical activities and maybe having a barbie [barbeque]. Not stereotyping here, but that's what our dads have suggested.'

Service manager interview 5 (t): Site 5

The importance of a male-friendly environment was also stressed by the fathers:

'We do a lot of great stuff working alongside with the mums' group at times, but they also need their space and we need our space ... a space where we can have a bit more macho stuff there, because a lot of the males don't come into the centre and they're scared to come in.'

Father participant focus group 5: Site 6

Relaxed and welcoming atmosphere

Fathers reported that an open, relaxed and friendly atmosphere was important to their connection with a service:

'The first session was very warm and I was quite impressed with just the warmth that was there and sense of welcome. I'm new to the area so I didn't know anybody and it was just nice to have a chat.'

Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

'Very welcoming. I felt very welcome, I felt very appreciated, just for being there, for coming to give a bit of a help, give a bit of a hand.'

Father participant focus group 1: Site 1

Flexible hours of operation

Flexible hours of operation were also thought to have a significant effect on how accessible the program was to fathers. While services involving children as participants (for example, playgroups) were held during the day, father-oriented services were usually offered in the evenings or on weekends, or at different times throughout the year to cater to the differing needs of fathers across the community:

'... one of the things for us around this was make it accessible. So we hold the courses both in the daytime and in the evenings and on the weekends and ... we've repeated some of the workshops that we've done that have been highly successful and well attended, but we repeated them at different times to ensure that ... access is available to everybody.'

Service manager interview 4 (t): Site 4

Additional incentives to participation

Programs also provided additional incentives to encourage engagement, such as serving meals, and addressed barriers to attendance, such as child care, transport and financial issues:

'... we've had breakfast sessions where we've started 8 o'clock in the morning ... Or we've done them in the early evening, 5:00 to 7:00 or 5:30 to 7:30 time. And they come along and have a shared tea and participate in the activities as well.'

Service manager/facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7

'We made a point of having several things that support people to come. The sessions are free. There's normally always food involved, which is always a drawcard. There's child care. We encourage them to do things with the kids. And normally if we're going out and about there's transport provided. So there's really lots of enablers in terms of retention.'

Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

Male-specific programs

There was certainly a shared view that male-specific programs are important in engaging men in child and family services:

> 'I think men deal with things in a different way and I think it's important for men to feel that they can go to male specific places to get support rather than turning up and they're the only bloke there, which does happen.'
>
> Service manager interview 4 (t): Site 4

The specific father focus also appeared to be what engaged some fathers in services:

> 'It was quite unusual to hear of something that's supporting the father and I was very interested at the thought that there were some services for the father.'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

Fathers also indicated a preference for talking with other fathers about their experiences and challenges:

> 'The [activity] is a prime example of where men feel at ease. They can talk about anything over there that they can't talk about to their doctors or their wives or anything, but over there they'll yap on about all their aches and worries.'
>
> Father participant focus group 6: Site 7

Flexible approach

Both fathers and workers suggested the importance of a flexible approach to program delivery:

> 'You've got to be prepared to go with the flow. A willingness to compromise. Being adaptable.'
>
> Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6

> 'We can't stay on track for more than five seconds. But that's the whole point. That's why I like it, we don't stay on topic.'
>
> Father participant focus group 2: Site 6

3.8 Benefits of father involvement in child and family services

> **'… now I'm more gentle with them [his children] and I understand their needs.'**
>
> **Father**

Service managers, facilitators and fathers were in total agreement that father participation in child and family services can produce positive outcomes for fathers, in terms of improvements in their knowledge, skills and confidence. Benefits were also regarded in terms of the couple relationship, the father–child relationship, and in relation to child wellbeing.

Increased parenting self-efficacy

Fathers and providers gave examples of how fathers had gained confidence since taking part in a program/service:

> 'In the [program], they gain a stronger confidence in their parenting role and their importance in the family unit as a father.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4

> 'I think it also helps you open up and ask another father or something like that. Well, I was—like [asked another father], I was looking after my son and this happened, you know, got any suggestions. I think it helps a lot with it.'
>
> Father participant focus group 5: Site 6

Increased parenting skills and knowledge

Parenting knowledge, skills and development were put forward as a clear outcome from program participation, whether this was an objective of the service or occurring through peer contact:

> '… you could see the effects. Next week they [fathers] would come and say "Yeah, we knew a lot of things but we didn't know how to implement them on our children …"'
>
> Project facilitator interview 2 (f): Site 2

> 'It's the little things you find out. You know, about the good doctor who's just come into town or the thing that's happened over there or this new service that's available.'
>
> Father participant focus group 1: Site 1

> 'It's heaps better at home. It's not so rough. Because … now I understand more. And like I can communicate with them [children]. I can get them to do things without yelling …'
>
> Father participant focus group 1: Site 1

This father continued:

> '…things at home are a lot better because I've got a lot better understanding of what he's [child] going through and what needs to be done. And I respect that and have a greater appreciation for it. And we've been shown tools or ways to actually work around and promote his wellbeing I suppose.'
>
> Father participant focus group 1: Site 1

Increased involvement

Several participants suggested that fathers had increased their level of involvement in child rearing as a result of contact with services:

> 'A lot of dads are very—ignorant is not the right word … unaware of how important they are to their children and how easy it is to just become involved in their activities, so that's probably the main thing.'
>
> Service manager interview 6 (t): Site 6

> 'The relationship is getting stronger because you're spending more time with them [children]. We hardly ever have the television on at home. Occasionally, it goes on for a movie, and most of the times we're playing games or outside, depending on the weather … It's just strengthening relationships with them … We get them involved in washing up, cooking …'
>
> Father participant focus group 5: Site 6

> 'Before I'd get home from work and put my lunch box away and see it [school information] sitting there and walk off. Now I stop, I look, I read it, I take an interest.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

More positive relationships with children

Improvements in father–child relationships were also regarded as an outcome of service provision:

> '… it's [the program] about creating those opportunities to have positive memories in interaction with the child.'
>
> Service manager/facilitator interview 1(f): Site 7

> 'We've found again and again lots of stories of dads reconnecting with their kids and building that trust again, because they've learnt to behave completely respectfully and caringly rather than abusive.'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

For many fathers, being involved with services and programs helped them understand their child better, in terms of their temperament, likes and dislikes, needs and development:

> 'To me it's so I can see my daughter do things that I wouldn't see at home, see how she reacts with other children, other people, other adults, how she plays, what she likes to eat.'
>
> Father participant focus group 4: Site 6

More positive relationships with partners

Improvements in the couple's relationship were seen as both a direct and indirect benefit of fathers' engagement in child and family services. Indirect effects emanated from the female partner's increased satisfaction and a sense of cooperation and common purpose in parenting:

> 'So having them [fathers] there opens up a lot of room for the mother, a lot of cooperation, a lot more assistance … it allows that coordinated approach to the child so the parents aren't in battle when they're dealing with their kids, so it helps take that factor out.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 1

> 'With that stimulus of the fatherhood class I then talked with her later and then that's helped to bond our relationship more in terms of sorting things out and getting an idea of where we both stand on certain subjects whether its nappy folding or immunisation.'
>
> Father participant focus group 3: Site 3

Direct benefits on the couple's relationships were thought to flow from the skills fathers developed through their participation:

> 'Just some of the skills that we have been taught here, where I was able to turn situations around which could have been really horrible arguments, able to defuse it with some of the skills I have learnt from the centre.'
>
> Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

Support network

The benefits of being connected with other fathers came through very clearly, in terms of normalising parenting challenges and helping fathers work through particular problems and issues. The fathers had built friendships and looked forward to meetings to vent their frustrations, be with people they were comfortable with, and have a laugh:

> '… he [friend and young father] said it's just good to find a group of guys that do have kids that he can just chat with you know. It makes it a bit easier.'
>
> Father participant interview 1 (t): Site 5

> 'To normalise it, too, that is often the biggest thing the men get is a sense of they are not alone, that there are men that have similar stories.'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

> 'But coming to the groups and listening to other blokes talk about their stuff and just getting the "Oh yeah, I have been through that, that was me last night." I did not feel so isolated in the problem. I thought I was the only one, so it opened my eyes a bit.'
>
> Father participant focus group 7: Site 8

Benefits for children

Participants also highlighted the direct benefits for children of fathers' contact with services:

> 'So from kids point of view they're getting acknowledgement of their perspective, they're getting listened to in a way they have not seen before; they're getting respectful behaviour modelled and abusive behaviour clearly demonstrated as being inappropriate …'
>
> Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8

> 'But also major spin-off of benefits for the children, because dad is suddenly doing things appropriately with me, communicating properly with me, playing with me, helping me with my tantrums. You know what I mean? The father's parenting skills have improved. So yes—major benefits to the children long-term.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4

Managing the process of acculturation

CALD fathers found the parenting program they attended helped them to reconcile parenting styles from their country-of-origin with the parenting styles they had encountered in Australia:

> '… learnt from the program how to deal with children—in Australia we have to respect the children and also be with them in a good way and almost be like a friend with them as well.'
>
> Father participant focus group 2: Site 2

> 'Also discuss Australian rule and law. Understanding the different ways that things work in Australia and then adapting that to parenting.'
>
> Father participant focus group 2: Site 2

Building community connectedness

Fathers valued the ways in which attending a service or program could connect them to other people, give them a sense of community and a positive way of occupying time:

> '… they've [fathers] really loved actually meeting other families from the area, in these courses which has then broken some of their isolation because they've been able then to see that same person down the street at the school that they saw in the course and actually have a familiar face that they could talk to. A few have built good friendships since the courses. So that's been a really helpful thing.'
>
> Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4

> '… for people who have just moved up here or they haven't really got many people in the community that they know that they can actually go and talk to, these people … you know they're really friends and giving and kind and you know they'll put you in the right direction …'
>
> Father participant interview 2 (t): Site 5

> 'I don't know if camaraderie is the right word, but people are obviously here for the reasons that you're here for. And you can relate.'
>
> Father participant focus group 1: Site 1

4 Discussion and conclusion

Social changes in the extent to which men are—or would like to be—involved in child rearing, combined with evidence that positive father involvement is beneficial from a personal, child and family perspective, suggests fathers should be appropriately included in child and family services and have access to effective support services as well. Despite this, due to a number of sociocultural, service and other factors, father participation is generally thought to be quite low.

As well as providing an evaluation of father engagement in the SFCS, while based on a small sample of convenience, this study contributes to the Australian evidence base concerning men's involvement and access to family related services.

The aim of the study was to describe the role of fathers in selected programs and identify successful strategies for engaging with fathers. In relation to the extent to which fathers were engaging with SFCS programs and services, the relatively low response rate makes it difficult to draw conclusions about engagement and service provision across the entire initiative. However, on the basis of the responses received, it appeared that fathers were variably involved in a diverse range of services and across the SFCS. With the exception of services targeting new parents, single parents and Indigenous parents, where there was a low level of father participation, services aiming to improve the knowledge, skills and social support of parents generally had a fair representation of father clients. Although, as expected, the data indicate that women dominate the SFCS as service users. By their very nature, the services that were most successful in engaging fathers were specifically tailored for men and were exclusive to fathers.

Fathers participated in a wide range of activities within the SFCS, not just those that were social or 'fun'. Fathers were seeking support to achieve a range of outcomes, from establishing a support network to developing skills and resources to respond to a child's special needs, to coming to terms with first-time and unplanned fatherhood, right through to addressing major personal and relationship issues in order to increase child contact.

Survey and interview data confirmed that many professionals find it challenging to engage fathers and encounter multiple barriers (Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001). Although many professionals value father involvement and would like to engage more with fathers, it can be an ongoing struggle to simply get men in the door of services that are community, parenting and child-centred.

However, data gathered from fathers who participated in focus groups and interviews suggest that, for the fathers who do make contact and stay involved with service and program activities, their experiences are very positive. Further, men's partners and children, as well as service professionals, value the presence and involvement of men.

The findings are in line with results from other research that suggest fathers who do get involved in service activities tend to be fathers who are already engaged with their children and families (Raikes, Summers & Roggman 2005). While there are challenges in recruiting fathers who have less involvement in family life, more research is needed to understand why fathers do not engage with services and explore what hard-to-reach groups of fathers would desire from services and programs.

In terms of the perceptions of fathers and fatherhood that inform service use and provision, the qualitative data suggests that the sense that fatherhood has changed in recent decades is prevalent among professionals and service users. The notion that fathers should be actively involved in child rearing was presented as a justification and explanation for father engagement with SFCS services and programs. Professionals also demonstrated a well-developed understanding of the benefits of father involvement. Many professionals stressed the importance of the father to the family, and in terms of child wellbeing. For some of the father participants, being an involved dad gave them the opportunity to provide their children with positive parenting experiences they felt they missed out on.

While there was a view that child and family services have a role in assisting fathers to address specific challenges and to support their efforts, there were definite barriers in doing so. Men were wary and 'put-off' by traditional child and family services because of the orientation towards mothers. Men's unwillingness to seek professional support was also identified as a barrier. However, when a partner or another service provider brought information about a program or service to their attention, and especially if another father recommended the service, engagement was more likely. At the highest level, sociocultural attitudes and values, particularly gender stereotypes and the extent to which men identify with and value the role of father, operate as a considerable barrier to father engagement.

While service providers acknowledged ongoing challenges in engagement, they had put in place a number of strategies to improve participation rates. These initiatives included:

◗ providing flexible hours of operation

◗ employing male facilitators

◗ developing father-specific services

◗ marketing services to men in male spaces

◗ using male-friendly language and advertisements (for example, addressing mothers and fathers in correspondence and advertising or using a gender neutral term like 'parents')

◗ creating service venues that men felt comfortable occupying.

Program managers and facilitators were also able to empathise with the experiences of men, understood their needs well, and had developed program content and structure that appeared to be producing tangible benefits for participants. These were discussed in terms of a reduction in social isolation, an increase in social support, and improvements in knowledge, skills, confidence, relationships and child wellbeing.

The study was also able to describe in more detail the elements and processes within services that were engaging to fathers. For example, fathers appeared to really connect with services where the facilitator was male and a father himself, who could be liked and trusted, and had encountered similar experiences and was willing to discuss them. Fathers were alienated by experts and a highly structured program format, and preferred informal peer discussions, which perhaps also included an activity such as woodworking or cooking, for example. Fathers did not attend services to be judged or put down, and gained more from a service when the positives were emphasised and the atmosphere was relaxed, warm and friendly. 'Male-friendly' surroundings also seemed to put men at ease and allowed them to benefit from what the program or service was offering. Most importantly, fathers wanted opportunities to talk with other fathers and hear their concerns and perspectives, and to make a few 'mates'.

While findings from the small sample of services that were specifically chosen for the intensive fieldwork were generally positive, the extent to which they can be generalised to other services and groups of men is unclear. There was a sense, however, that some of the issues that alienate men, particularly in relation to a mother-oriented service culture, may still pervade child and family services more generally. There may be value, therefore, in realigning services that have traditionally focused on women and children to be father-inclusive in accordance with the nine principles that were deemed to constitute best practice in the delivery of father-inclusive services that emerged from a forum on Father-Inclusive Practice in Australia in 2005 under the auspice of The Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle (The Family Action Centre 2005). These principles were father awareness, respect for fathers, equity and access, father strengths, practitioner strengths, advocacy and empowerment, partnership with fathers, recruitment and training, and research and evaluation.

There was also a sense in the current study that relatively few men that could potentially benefit from such services are actually receiving them, and that greater effort may be needed to develop additional fathering services and to publicise them widely and strategically. There was also a view that existing services may not cater to the specific needs of fathers from CALD backgrounds, and that individual services need to be set up

accordingly. This accords with Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter (2001), who argued that if men's access to family services is going to improve, then engaging men needs to be a higher, and planned for, priority on the agenda of service providers and staff.

4.1 Conclusion

At a time of shifting social mores and increasing expectation of father involvement in direct child care, child and family services have a definite role to play in supporting fathers to help them address shortcomings in skills, knowledge and personal functioning. Findings from the study suggest that while there is certainly room for improvement in the participation of fathers in SFCS programs and services, a reservoir of knowledge and enthusiasm exists about ways to successfully engage fathers and to ensure that contact with services leads to lasting benefits for fathers and their families.

The accounts of program staff and fathers provide some useful insights into how best to pursue the aim of increasing father involvement in child and family services. While the more maternal focus of many services may need to be addressed for fathers to become fully involved, services exclusive for fathers and men are likely to assist in the wider integration of fathers into available services. It appears that men are reached most successfully through referrals of those close to them, particularly other fathers. Unstructured, peer-oriented and non-judgemental program content, coordinated by an honest and skilled male facilitator in a male-friendly location, or during a focused activity, appears to connect and satisfy even the most circumspect of men.

Appendix A: Survey cover letter from FaHCSIA

Australian Government

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Box 7788 Canberra Mail Centre ACT 2610
Telephone 1300 653 227
TTY 1800 260 402
www.fahcsia.gov.au

‹‹Date››

‹‹Address Details››

Dear ‹‹SFCS Program/Service››

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is conducting a research project on father engagement with programs and services funded through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS). Parenting, family orientated and child development and wellbeing programs and services are being included in the research project.

This study is being conducted on behalf of the SFCS evaluation consortium with the full knowledge and support of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

The study is part of the national evaluation of the SFCS and will provide valuable insight into fathers' participation in the strategy, and contribute to building the Australian evidence base about father engagement within community services.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Please read the enclosed information from AIFS and consider if your service or program would like to contribute to the research project.

If you have any questions regarding the study please contact [contact details removed].

Yours sincerely,

[Contact details removed]

Branch Manager

Appendix B: Survey cover letter from AIFS

Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

«Contact_Name»
«Org_name»
«Postal_Address»
«Suburb_Town» «State» «Postcode»

‹‹Date››

Dear ‹‹LA, ItG or CfC›› Service Provider,

There is growing awareness about the important role positive father involvement plays in healthy child development. Increasingly, social and welfare services are becoming more aware of the need to actively engage men in child development and family strengthening strategies for the benefit of children, mums and dads, family relationships and communities.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is undertaking a study exploring the participation of fathers in Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) funded parenting, family orientated and child development and wellbeing programs and services. The purpose of the study is to provide assessment and evaluation of father engagement within the strategy as part of the national evaluation of the SFCS.

Our study will:

◗ Evaluate the proportion of fathers participating in SFCS programs and services;

◗ Explore the ways in which men are experiencing their involvement with SFCS programs and services;

◗ Explore service managers and staff perceptions and experiences surrounding father engagement;

◗ Identify promising practice in engaging fathers; and

◗ Contribute to building the Australian knowledge base about strategies for engaging fathers and meeting fathers' needs.

Learning more about the fathers participating in Commonwealth-funded projects is an important part of our study. You can make a valuable contribution by completing the attached survey about father participation in your service or program: «Project_name».

We will also be conducting interviews with a small number of program managers and staff, and focus groups with father participants during a second stage of the study. Please indicate at the end of the survey if you are happy for AIFS to contact you regarding the in-depth fieldwork phase of the research.

Agreeing to be contacted at this stage of the study does not commit you to participation — you will be provided with more detailed information on what the study involves, and will be at complete liberty to refuse participation.

If your service is selected to take part in fieldwork we will contact you by telephone to formally invite you to participate in the second stage of the study and to make further arrangements.

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to return the enclosed survey.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in our research. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have.

Kind Regards,

[Contact details removed]

Appendix C: Letter to CfC Facilitating Partner advising of AIFS intention to contact services

Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

«Contact_Name»
«Org_name»
«Postal_Address»
«Suburb_Town» «State» «Postcode»

«Date»

Dear «Facilitating Partner»,

Recently, FaHCSIA was in contact with you about the fathering engagement study that AIFS is conducting as part of the national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS).

This letter is to advise you that we will shortly be sending a survey to the CfC programs/services in the [insert name here] site and asking them if they are interested in being considered for inclusion in the fieldwork component of the study.

Fieldwork will involve telephone interviews with project managers and face-to-face interviews with workers, and a focus group with father participants. If any of the services you administer are selected to participate in fieldwork we will let you know ahead of time
 in writing.

If you have any questions about this process, or about the research project please do not hesitate to contact me on [contact details removed].

Kindest Regards,

[Contact details removed]

Appendix D: Father engagement survey

Engaging Fathers in the
Stronger Families and Communities Strategy

1. **Are fathers currently involved in any activity or program offered by your service?**

    Yes　　　　*No*　　　　　　*(please circle)*

    If yes, please provide the program name and a brief description:

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    Note: Please provide estimates for the following questions if exact figures are unavailable.

2. **How many fathers are <u>currently</u> involved with this program?**

3. **Approximately what proportion is this one of the total number of parents/carers currently involved with this program?** (ie. 20% or 'one fifth')

    _____

4. **How many fathers have participated in this program <u>over the past year</u>?**

    _____

5. **Approximately what proportion is this of the total number of parents/carers who have participated in this program over the past year?** (ie. 20% or 'one fifth')

    _____

6. **Has your service employed any specific strategies or ideas to increase father engagement and participation in your service (e.g. including images of fatherhood and using 'male friendly' language in information and promotional materials, holding programs outside of business hours, employing male workers to increase fathers' accessibility to the service)?**

Yes *No* *(please circle)*

If yes, please provide a brief description:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. **Please provide us with your program details:**

Name of service manager: _____

Name of service/program: _____

Contact Number (include area code): _____ Mobile _____

Email: _____

SFCS Stream: CfC ItG LA (please circle)

We would like to find out more about services that are engaging fathers in a second stage of our study. This will involve phone interviews with project managers, face-to-face interviews with workers and focus groups with fathers. If your service is selected to take part in fieldwork we will contact you on the details provided above to arrange a time.

Can we contact you about this aspect of our study? Yes No (please circle)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey

Appendix E: Coding of services and programs

1. Deliverables/outcomes among programs and services

Program type	Code
Parenting skills	Programs aiming to improve parents' knowledge and skills surrounding their interactions with their children
Local support network building	Programs providing peer or professional support
Relationship building	Programs aiming to enhance the resilience of families through strengthening parent/child and family relationships
Playgroups	Facilitated and unfacilitated groups
Information and resources	Includes service hubs that connect parents to other services or programs
Life skills	Programs assisting parents with education, employment, budgeting skills and household management
Mentoring	Programs providing mentoring services to parents
Healthy child development	Includes programs about child nutrition and healthy living and programs aiming to enhance parents' support of children's education
Community building	Programs aiming to enhance interactions and connections in local communities
Transition to parenthood	Antenatal and postnatal programs

2. Targeted service user populations

Population code	Code
Parents—general	Includes programs aimed at families and families with young children
High-need parents	Includes parents experiencing social and economic disadvantage and programs for parents with disabilities or with children with disabilities, parents experiencing domestic violence issues, incarcerated parents and parents with substance abuse issues
Young parents	Parents under 25 years of age
CALD parents	Includes programs for refugee parents and programs specifically for CALD fathers
Fathers	Includes programs for men that may deal with fathers and fathering issues and programs for men in relation to domestic violence
Indigenous parents	Includes programs specifically aimed at Indigenous fathers
Grandparents	Programs that may include grandfathers as the primary male figure in a child's life
Single parents	Separated parents providing sole or shared care to children
Parents with children with challenging behaviours	Includes programs and services to assist parents to better manage children's emotional and/or behavioural difficulties
New parents	Pregnant parents and those with new infants

Appendix F: Interview schedule—telephone interview with service managers

Name of Service/Program:_____

Name of Service Manager: _____

Contact Number: _____

Date of Phone Interview:_____

No. and Code of Interview: _____

Thank you for making the time to contribute to AIFS' study on father participation in the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. We are very pleased that your service has agreed to be involved. An important part of the fieldwork section of the study is to gain insight from the provider and the consumer perspective on issues relating to engaging and servicing fathers in SFCS funded programs and services. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about the managerial experience and perspective surrounding working with fathers.

The interview will take around 20 minutes to half an hour to complete. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me before we begin?

As you are aware, this interview is being recorded by an external conferencing service. They will provide me with a sound file of the interview which will be transcribed and used as data in our study. Are you happy to proceed?

▸ On your survey reply you provided a description of some of your service's activities. Can you tell me a little more about the SFCS funded activities that fathers are involved in your service?
What information, skills and resources does it deliver?
What are the intended objectives and outcomes?
When does the service operate?
How is it facilitated?
What size groups does it service?

▸ How do fathers find out about your service/program?

▸ What do you hope fathers will gain from participating in the service?

▸ What do you hope children and families gain from fathers participating in the service?

▸ Is the number of fathers accessing the service an issue?
For example, could more fathers be participating in the service or is the service experiencing high demand?

▸ How do you feel that meeting the needs of fathers differs from providing a service or program to other client groups?

▸ What about in terms of the specific group you service, do they have additional or specific needs? How have you responded to these needs and issues?

▸ What are the types of skills you feel project workers need to effectively engage with fathers? How do they gain these skills?

▸ Have your staff received any training or professional development on engaging with fathers?

▸ Has father participation in the service been discussed at team meetings or other forums? What issues were raised?

⬦ [IF THE SERVICE HAS EMPLOYED STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING FATHERS] How did you develop ideas for increasing father participation?

⬦ How have these strategies worked in practice? Do you feel that they have been successful?

⬦ What else do you think could be effective to increase the number of fathers accessing the service?

⬦ Do you have any mechanisms in place to gather feedback from participants?
What sort of feedback have you had from fathers and their families about your service?

⬦ If yes, have you changed anything in response to feedback from participants?

⬦ Do you feel that it is important that fathers are encouraged to engage with family and child services? Why?

⬦ What barriers do you feel exist that can effect fathers in terms of seeking support or participating in family and child services and programs?

⬦ Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

As we have discussed in previous conversations we would like to visit your program to interview workers and hold a focus group with some fathers.

What is the best way to organise to meet with staff and fathers?

Arrangements for fieldwork:

We would like to contact project workers/facilitators directly to discuss their interest in taking part in face-to-face interviews and to ask them to help us recruit fathers to take part in focus groups. We will send project workers an information sheet outlining the study and a second information sheet that can be distributed to fathers.

Project worker name: _____   Phone:_____

Project worker name: _____   Phone: _____

Project worker name: _____   Phone: _____

Would it be useful to have this information sheet in any languages other than English?

Would it be useful for us to organise a translator to attend the focus group?

_____
_____
_____

Appendix G: Information sheet for project workers/facilitators

Fathers and the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy
Information sheet for project workers/facilitators

Dear SFCS project worker/facilitator,

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is currently conducting a study on father participation in parenting and family services and child development and wellbeing programs. The study is part of a national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS), which is funding all Communities for Children, Local Answers and Invest to Grow programs, services and activities.

The purpose of the study is to gauge the proportion of fathers participating in SFCS services and programs and to explore issues concerning father engagement and service satisfaction. Your Project Manager recently completed a survey about the participation of fathers in your service or program and now we would like to learn more about the experiences of project workers and facilitators.

We would like to meet with you to conduct a face-to-face interview about your experiences working with fathers. We are particularly interested to hear about:

◗ Your experiences and views on working with fathers;

◗ What you feel your program/service provides fathers and why it is a useful/ valuable activity for fathers to be engaged in;

◗ How do you feel working with fathers and meeting their needs may differ from engaging with other client groups;

◗ Successful strategies for engaging fathers in the service/program; and

◗ Any challenges you have experienced engaging fathers with the service/program.

The interview will be conducted with an AIFS researcher and will take about an hour. Participation in the interview is voluntary and the information you provide us will be kept in the strictest confidence.

This is an opportunity for you to share your opinions and views on working with fathers in community services and to contribute to building the Australian knowledge base about how we can more effectively provide fathers with quality services and increase their participation in parenting and child and family wellbeing programs and projects.

We would also like to ask you to help us to recruit fathers to participate in the focus group we will be running when we visit your service/program. This involves distributing the enclosed information sheet to fathers and arranging a suitable time and location for the focus group to take place.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is Australia's foremost centre for research and information on family wellbeing. Located in Melbourne, the institute has been investigating and promoting understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia since 1980. If you would like more information about us please visit our website at ‹www.aifs.gov.au›.

For more information about AIFS involvement in the SFCS national evaluation please visit the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website at ‹www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/›.

Thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in the study. If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact the AIFS Research Officer.

Appendix H: Plain language statement

Plain language statement—verbal for project workers and father participants

Thank you for coming along today. My name is (name of researcher) and I am part of a team of researchers carrying out a study on fathers' participation and experiences with parenting, family and child wellbeing and development services and programs. These are my colleagues (name of co-facilitator and scribe).

The study is part of an evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. This strategy provides funding for (program/service). We would like to invite you to contribute to the evaluation by participating in a focus group/interview. We have already talked to the program manager about issues relating to father participation in this service and now we are interested to learn more about project workers' and fathers' experiences, views and attitudes.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you will not be named or identified in the final report. If you don't want to participate you don't have to (for fathers add: and it will in no way affect your ability to attend the (program/service)). If you decide to participate in the focus group or interview and then later decide that you do not want the information you provided to be included in the final report you can inform us of this at anytime up until the final report has been written.

For the project workers: We would like to interview you together, your project manager will not be present and the information you share with us will not be made available to your project manager.

For fathers: AIFS researchers will run the focus group. Think of it as an organised discussion, there are no right or wrong answers. We are just interested in hearing about what you think. Neither project workers nor the project manager will be present at the focus group, and information you share with us will not be made available to them.

Please just use first names during the interview/focus group. If you don't want to use your first name feel free to make up a name you feel comfortable with. Although we ask you to sign consent forms using your real and full name, your identity in the final report will remain anonymous. We will do our utmost to maintain your confidentiality but need to inform you that confidentiality may not be able to be maintained if you mention illegal activities or harm to yourself or others during the interview/focus group.

The information you give us will be recorded and analysed (in a non-identifying format), and used in a written report. The report will be given to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, who may make this report publicly available.

As a participant you are welcome to ask for a brief summary of the project findings.

If you would like to participate in the evaluation we ask you to please complete a consent form.

Appendix I: Consent form

Engaging Fathers in Stronger Families and Communities Strategy—CONSENT FORM

Name: _____

I am a **father participant / project worker or facilitator** (please circle) in a Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Service or Program.

I have been informed about this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw my participation at any stage.

I understand that my decision to be involved in this project will not affect my participation in any Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Service and/or Program I am currently involved with or may become involved with in the future.

Everything I say in the interview/focus group (please circle) will be treated in the strictest confidence as far as the law allows.

If I am participating in a focus group, I also agree to maintain the confidentiality of other participants and not discuss issues raised in the focus group with outside parties.

I would / would not (please circle) like to be involved in this research project. I understand that my responses will be recorded and transcribed to be used in a research report.

Father participants only: I have received a Coles voucher to value of $50 as a token of researchers' appreciation for my participation.

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Witness: _____

I would like a copy of the summary report sent to me at the following address:

_____

_____

Appendix J: Interview schedule—interviews with project workers

Name of Service/Program: _____

Name of Interviewee/s:_____

Date of Interview: _____

No. and Code of Interview: _____

We have already completed a short survey and conducted a phone interview with your project manager about issues relating to father participation in your service/program and would like to talk to you about your experiences and views on this issue.

The interview will take about an hour and will be recorded so that we can transcribe your responses. To participate I need to obtain your written consent (read through consent form).

Written consent given: Yes   No

▸ Can you tell me about your experiences working with fathers?
  [Prompts: What do you find rewarding about working with fathers? What challenges have you experienced?]

▸ How do you feel that meeting the needs of fathers differs from meeting the needs of other client groups?

▸ Why is the program/service important? What benefits do you feel men gain from participating in the program?

▸ Why are these benefits important for men, their partners, children and communities?

▸ What sort of feedback have you had from participants?

▸ Have you changed anything or further developed the service/program in response to feedback from participants?

▸ What issues, if any, have you had surrounding the recruitment and retention of father participants?

▸ [IF THE PROGRAM TARGETS A SPECIFIC GROUP] The service/program targets (name of group e.g. Arabic speaking fathers)? What are some of the specific issues relating to this group?

▸ How are you managing/responding to these issues?

▸ What sorts of skills do you feel workers need to engage effectively with fathers?

▸ Do you feel that father participation is an issue for the service/program? Why?
  [Prompt: What barriers do you think men experience when accessing the service
  What do you feel could enhance father participation in the service/program?]

▸ [IF PROGRAM HAS EMPLOYED STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING FATHER PARTICPATION] How were ideas about increasing father involvement developed and implemented?

▸ How have these ideas worked in practice? What outcomes have been achieved?

▸ Do you feel that increasing father involvement in social services and programs is an important issue? Why?

▸ Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Appendix K: Focus group schedule — father participants

Name of Service/Program: _____

Date of Focus Group: _____

Number of Participants: _____

No. and Code of Focus Groups: _____

We have already completed a short survey and conducted a phone interview with the project manager and are holding interviews with project workers about issues relating to father participation in this service. We would now like to talk to you about your experiences and views on this issue.

The focus group will take about an hour and will be recorded so that we can transcribe your responses. To participate I need to obtain your written consent (read through consent form).

Consent given: **Yes**   **No**

- Can you tell us your name and the best thing about being a dad?

- How did you find out about the service/program and what made you want to join?

- What did you think the first time you came?

- What sort of things are you learning about at the program/service?

- What's good about the [include name here] program/service?

- Has coming to the service changed or affected anything at home for you?
  [Prompts: Are you doing anything different, are you spending more time with the kids and/or doing different things and activities with them? Has it made you think about new issues or think differently about existing issues?]

- Why is it important for you as a dad to come to this service?
  [Prompt: What difference does it make to your children, partner and family?]

- Could the service do anything differently or better?

- Why is it good for men to attend programs/services like this one?

- Why do you think lots of men don't participate in programs/services like this one?
  [Prompt: you see lots of images of mums and kids when you come to places like this, do you think seeing more pictures of dads and kids would make men feel like the service has more to offer them?]

- What do you think the service and programs could do to get more men to come?

- What would you tell other dads about the program/service?

- Has anybody got something else they would like to talk about before we finish?

Appendix L: Coding of interview and focus group transcripts

Site	Target service users	Deliverables/ outcomes	State/territory and location	Manager interviews	Manager/ facilitator interviews	Facilitator interviews	Group interviews: facilitators	Volunteer facilitator interviews	Father participant focus group	Father participant phone interviews
1	High-need parents (children with additional needs)	Local support network building and parenting skills	NSW rural	Service manager interview 1 (t): Site 1		Project facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 1			Father participant focus group 1: Site 1	
2	CALD parents (fathers)	Parenting skills	Vic urban	Service manager interview 2 (t): Site 2		Project facilitator interview 2 (f): Site 2			Father participant focus group 2: Site 2	
3	New parents (fathers)	Transition to parenthood and parenting skills	NSW rural	Service manager interview 3 (t) Site 3		Project facilitator interview 3 (f): Site 3			Father participant focus group 3: Site 3	
4	High-need parents (economic disadvantage)	Parenting skills	NSW regional	Service manager interview 4 (t): Site 4		Project facilitator interview 4 (t): Site 4				
5	Young parents	Transition to parenting, parenting skills and playgroup	QLD rural	Service manager interview 5 (t): Site 5		Project facilitator interview 5 (t): Site 5				Father participant interview 1 (t): Site 5 Father participant interview 2 (t): Site 5
6	High-need parents (economic disadvantage)	Healthy child development, local support network building	TAS urban	Service manager interview 6 (t): Site 6			Project facilitator group interview 1 (f): Site 6	Volunteer facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 6	Father participant focus group 4: Site 6 Father participant focus group 5: Site 6	

Site	Target service users	Deliverables/ outcomes	State/territory and location	Manager interviews	Manager/ facilitator interviews	Facilitator interviews	Group interviews: facilitators	Volunteer facilitator interviews	Father participant focus group	Father participant phone interviews
7	Fathers	Parenting skills, relationship building	SA remote		Service manager/ facilitator interview 1 (f): Site 7				Father participant focus group 6: Site 7	
8	Fathers and high-need parents (domestic violence issues)	Local network support, parenting skills and relationship building	NSW rural	Service manager interview 7 (t): Site 8		Project facilitator interview 6 (f): Site 8			Father participant focus group 7: Site 8	

Endnotes

1. Despite this progress, the relevant research still tends to focus on fathering among the middle class, overlooking specific populations, such as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) fathers, gay fathers, fathers of children with disabilities or fathers with mental health or substance abuse issues (Fletcher et al. 2004).

2. There is substantial literature concerning the extent to which fathers are involved in child rearing (for a review, see Lamb 2004; Russell et al. 1999).

3. Women also experience barriers to accessing family and child services, so there is an argument for making services more 'family friendly'.

4. Adopting a social view of fatherhood is important not only because the term is inclusive but because its use implies a recognition of the diversity of roles men may play in the lives of children and the often complex relationship structures present in contemporary families.

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Occasional Papers

1. *Income support and related statistics: a ten-year compendium, 1989–99*
   Kim Bond and Jie Wang (January 2001)

2. *Low fertility: a discussion paper*
   Alison Barnes (February 2001)

3. *The identification and analysis of indicators of community strength and outcomes*
   Alan Black and Phillip Hughes (June 2001)

4. *Hardship in Australia: an analysis of financial stress indicators in the 1998–99*
   Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Expenditure Survey
   J Rob Bray (December 2001)

5. *Welfare Reform Pilots: characteristics and participation patterns of three disadvantaged groups*
   Chris Carlile, Michael Fuery, Carole Heyworth, Mary Ivec, Kerry Marshall and Marie Newey (June 2002)

6. *The Australian system of social protection–an overview (second edition)*
   Peter Whiteford and Gregory Angenent (June 2002)

7. *Income support customers: a statistical overview 2001*
   Corporate Information and Mapping Services, Strategic Policy and Knowledge Branch, Family and Community Services (March 2003)

8. *Inquiry into long-term strategies to address the ageing of the Australian population over the next 40 years*
   Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services submission to the 2003 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing (October 2003)

9. *Inquiry into poverty and financial hardship*
   Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (October 2003)

10. *Families of prisoners: literature review on issues and difficulties*
    Rosemary Woodward (September 2003)

11. *Inquiries into retirement and superannuation*
    Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services submissions to the Senate Select Committee on Superannuation (December 2003)

12. *A compendium of legislative changes in social security 1908–1982*
    (June 2006)

13. *A compendium of legislative changes in social security 1983–2000*
    Part 1 1983–1993, Part 2 1994–2000
    Bob Daprè (June 2006)

14. *Evaluation of Fixing Houses for Better Health Projects 2, 3 and 4*
    SGS Economics & Planning in conjunction with Tallegalla Consultants Pty Ltd (August 2006)

15. *The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review*
    Professor Robyn Penman (November 2006)

16. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views on research in their communities*
    Professor Robyn Penman (November 2006)

17. *Growing up in the Torres Strait Islands: a report from the Footprints in Time trials*
Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health in collaboration with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (November 2006)

18. *Costs of children: research commissioned by the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support*
Paul Henman; Richard Percival and Ann Harding; Matthew Gray (July 2007)

19. *Lessons learnt about strengthening Indigenous families and communities: what's working and what's not?*
John Scougall (July 2007)

20. *Stories on 'growing up' from Indigenous people in the ACT metro/Queanbeyan region*
Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health in collaboration with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (April 2008)

21. *Inquiry into the cost of living pressures on older Australians*
Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs submissions to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs (August 2008)